

SLD 04.04.10 Easter
Emory Presbyterian Church
Philippians 2:5-11
John 20:1-18
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“Can You Believe It?”

Jesus Christ is risen today! Can you believe it?

The One who died on the cross three days ago, now lives!

Can you believe it? God reached right into the gaping maw of Jesus' death and raised him up!

Can you honestly belly up to that revelation?

It certainly defies all reason. All common sense. All expectation. All our understanding of the way things are. Of the way things go.

I mean, if Jesus' resurrection really *were* true, if it really *happened*, if it's *still* happening the way we say it is, why, that would mean that...love is stronger than death! And can any of us really believe *that*?

Ever had somebody you love die? Did your love or anybody else's keep them from dying? Can love *really* be stronger than death?

Oh, we all know that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is *the* central story through which we Christians express our faith. Our primary “motif.” Our central myth. Our “organizing principle,” we might say. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the way we make sense of the world, at least of the spiritual world. But we all also know that the *real* world operates on different principles, right? At least insofar as what we can observe?

Despite all the bells and flowers, pomp and procession, of this holy day when the church throws back its head and confidently crows for all the world that “Jesus Christ is risen!,” you and I don't *really* take the resurrection all that seriously, do we? After all, it's

just a *belief*, isn't it? A hope? A dream? A compassionate stab at mitigating the terror of death? Some might even call it "wishful thinking."

Probably not Jesus' *earliest* followers, though. The ones who really *knew* Jesus. Who had experienced him first hand, heard him preach and teach, been personally been *touched* by him, surely *they* really believed he could be raised by the dead, would recognize his post-resurrection presence.

Well, according to today's text, not Mary Magdalene. She who followed and loved and ministered to Jesus, who heard his word and held his hand, walked and talked with him, watched him eat and preach, and heal, *she* couldn't believe Jesus had been resurrected, couldn't recognize her risen Lord.

When Mary finds Jesus' tomb empty, her heart drops in dismay and she runs to tell the others, "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they've laid him."

How about Jesus' other disciples? Do they have a clue what's going on?

Fueled by fury and dismay at Mary's report, Jesus' other disciples run toward Mary's bad news of the empty tomb. Can't get there fast enough to find out who has interfered with their pitiful plan for a decent burial for Jesus. After all he had endured, after all *they* have endured...!

Never mind that the prophets had foretold Jesus' resurrection, that Jesus had repeatedly preached it, explained to his disciples what was going to happen, what needed to happen, what *had* to happen, for existence to unfold as it must. Never mind the disciples were given three years of Jesus' presence to get them used to the idea, all they see before them is an empty tomb. Beaten, bewildered, too broken to weep, they return to their homes.

Mary remains at the tomb. Two angels appear. “Love is stronger than death!” their presence proclaims, but their witness makes no purchase. “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. Mary cries, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” .

Then Mary turns, or something turns in her, and suddenly she sees someone – we know it’s Jesus, but she does not recognize him. “Woman, why are you weeping?” asks the stranger.

Mary still can’t believe Love is stronger than death, even when it’s standing right in front of her. Until Love speaks her name, and her heart is opened to the truth.

“Rabbouni!”

Naturally Mary wants to cling to Love, hold on to it, keep it with her. Who wouldn’t? Who doesn’t? But you can’t hold on to love. Love can’t be caught, or caged, or commanded, is not biddable. You can enjoy it for what it is, and you can *share* it; that’s when you’ll see it grow.

Mary runs back to Jesus’ other friends to share her good news.

Only, have you ever tried to describe love, or any other miracle, without knowing somewhere inside you that words just aren’t going to do the trick? That you just had to *be* there? And the disciples hadn’t been there. Confused, grieving, huddled fearfully behind locked doors, afraid of the Jews, afraid of the Romans, afraid for their own future, the disciples cannot grasp what Mary is saying.

Until suddenly Jesus stands among them - what are fear and locked doors to Jesus? - and offers them a blessing of peace.

“Who *is* this guy?,” the disciples wonder, as they look at each other and huddle a little closer. Jesus shows them the wounds on his hands, on his side. Something about

this persuades the disciples – maybe it’s a gory guy thing – and they rejoice in their discovery! Love really *is* stronger than death!

Well, *most* of them get this picture. Not everybody is present for Jesus’ show and tell. Thomas hadn’t been there. So when the disciples see him later, they eagerly exclaim, “Thomas, Thomas, we’ve seen the Lord!”

“Get a grip, guys. You’re seeing things. I know it’s a tough time; we all wish we could take the edge off the moment. Make things turn out all right. But things *haven’t* turned out all right. Things stink. Jesus is dead – we saw him die - and that’s all there is to it. So forget it. Enough of this wishful thinking. Y’all didn’t see Jesus. Jesus is dead. In the grave. Well, okay, not in the grave – who knows where they’ve taken him? But really, who cares? What possible difference can it make now?

“No, seriously, Thomas, we really did see him! All of us! Right here in this room!”

“Okay, look, even if I believed you, which I don’t, I’d have to see it for myself. And until I can poke around in Jesus’ wounds for myself, I’m not buying it.”

For a week they walk on eggshells around each other, the disciples all giddy, Thomas just rolling his eyes.

Until, again closed doors notwithstanding, Jesus breaks into their midst again. “Hey. Peace be with y’all. You, too, Thomas, you ole grump. Hey, listen, you don’t believe it’s me? Put your finger here and see my hands. Stick your pinkie in this gash on my side. Gross, huh? But whatever it takes, right? *Now* do you believe?”

Says Thomas, “My Lord and my God.”

And Jesus thinks, “Is *this* what it’s gonna to take for every single disciple from here on out? I’m not sure I’ve got it in me. This is going to take *forever!* Yeah, yeah, I know,

Daddy, not my will but thine. But still, ‘blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe, because they’re sure gonna take a *lot* less work!’”

Love is stronger than death – the ultimate testimony of Jesus’ resurrection.

Can *you* believe it?

Not many can. Not many ever have, really. Look at what it takes even for those who know him best. Even *they* cannot believe it. At least not on their own. So, what, finally, convinces them?

Some, like Mary, seem to experience direct communion with Jesus. Others demand proof, and get it. For others, not even proof will help; only when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them will their eyes be opened. Others, like Judas, never do get it. And some of those who do, like Peter, fall away again. It’s a tricky business, this matter of faith.

Interesting to note that *none* of the disciples gets it through the testimony of another. Looks like transformative knowledge must be given by God. But do we play any part in it?

In the autobiography of his younger years, writer and theologian Frederick Buechner speaks of *choosing* to believe that “...a saving mystery breaks into our (lives) at odd and unforeseeable moments.”¹ As if there were also an element of choice to participating in faith. First Buechner *chooses* to believe, and then looks around to see what happens. What changes. What impact his belief has on his life. As though what is given sometimes comes later. As though sometimes, first, one must open to the *possibility* of faith. At least Buechner chooses first to believe, and then spends a lifetime figuring out what faith means and how it affects his life.

¹ Sacred Journey, Frederick Buechner, HarperSanFrancisco, 1982, p. 1986.

Retired Cistercian Abbess Jean-Marie Howe remarks similarly that our relationship with Christ (spiritual transformation) depends finally upon our capacity to be *penetrated* by the Mystery of Christ. To have Christ “done unto us.”² In order for the Mystery to enter, our being, our substance, must be porous, she says, open to the *possibility* of Mystery.

“We must let ourselves be plowed,” she says, “so that the furrows of our person become deeper and deeper, so that our earth becomes softer and softer. This is something our being craves,” she says, but this plowing is *kenosis*, emptying, the death which must precede new life, rebirth, ...and *kenosis* is not easy.

Ask *Jesus*, who, though he was in the form of God..emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and became obedient to the point of death. Phil. 2:6-8. Ask those first disciples of Jesus. Ask any disciple of Jesus today.

Kenosis, emptying, pouring ourselves out on purpose, is not easy. But to the measure that we are able, says Howe, to that measure, grace can penetrate us. Mystery can fill us. Depth is possible. Transformation is possible.”³

What do you suppose you and I would have to pour out of ourselves genuinely to believe that Jesus Christ is risen? Of what would we have to empty ourselves to trust that Love is the essential being of all creation,⁴ that God so loved the world that God sent the only Son, that Jesus showed his love by his life, to be sure, but most clearly but by his death on the cross, that the cross is God’s solidarity with human suffering, that God seeks to suppress suffering not by domination, but by love.⁵ Of what would we have to empty ourselves in order to believe that life in Christ frees us from the law of sin and death (Ro. 8:2), that the same power that raised Christ from the grave is available to us today? What

² Jean-Marie Howe, “Cistercian Monastic Life/Vows” A Vision, p. 367, (7). Quoted in *People’s Companion to the Breviary, The Liturgy of the Hours in Inclusive Language*, The Carmelites of Indianapolis, 1997. p. 174.

³ Ibid.

⁴ R. *Breviary*, p. 489.

⁵ Leonardo Boff, *The Breviary*. p. 481.

would we need to pour out to make room for the truth that “resurrection is not a single event but an ever-extending ‘outflow’ of energy previously damned up by the power of sin and death,”⁶ that “pain, suffering, disappointment...can be creative, can free us for creative transformation” because, in the end, Love is, indeed, stronger than death?

Says Buechner, “there will always be those who say that such faith is only a dream.” But if it is, it is like a “dream in which the clouds open to show such riches ready to drop upon us that when we wake into the reality of nothing more than common sense, we cry to dream again because the dreaming seems truer than the waking to the fullness of reality. Faith, he says, is both the dreaming and the crying.”⁷

“On Easter morning,” remarks Henri Nouwen in this year’s Lenten devotional, “we can still feel the pains of the world, the pains of our family and friends, the pains of our hearts. They are still there and will be for a long time. Still, all is different because we have met Jesus and he has spoken to us.”

Can you believe it? Can any part of you *choose* to believe it? Choose to make room in your heart for such a mystery?

Advises the white pearl in one of Frank Baum’s Oz books: “Never question the truth of what you fail to understand, for the world is filled with wonders.”⁸

Jesus Christ is risen today.

Can you believe it?

What difference do you suppose it would make if you could?

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁶ Haughton, p.489.

⁷ Frederich Buechner, *Sacred Journey*, HarperCollins, New York, 1982, pp. 57-8.

⁸ Rinkitink in Oz, by L. Frank Baum, Gutenberg Etext. Chapter 1, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/958/958-h/958-h.htm>