

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

April 4, 2010
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

This is the Day

“This is the day,” thought Mary as she rose before dawn to fulfill her duty. “This is the day, now that the Sabbath is passed, that I must show respect for the body of Jesus. Today is the day when the grief will really sink in, for when I see his wrapped body and perform the ritual anointing, there will no avoiding the reality of his death.”

But then the stone was rolled away. So, presuming that someone with evil intent had moved it, and had taken Jesus’ body, she ran to tell Peter and the other disciple. And perhaps Peter thought, as the two men ran together back to the tomb, “This is the day. I thought things couldn’t get any worse, but they have. Not only did Judas betray him, not only did I deny him 3 times just as he said, not only is Jesus dead at the hands of the Romans, not only are our hopes destroyed but now his body has been stolen. Who could have done this? And why?”

And the other disciple, when he arrived at the tomb and knelt and saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the head cloth rolled up in another place, might have wondered, “What is this day?”

This is a day of confused emotions, moving from grief and anger and later to wonder and joy, a roller coaster day of emotions, a day which changes the world and everything in it. This day we call Easter is the day when the old order ends and the new creation begins, when earthly powers are trumped by divine power, when death is no longer the conclusion of the story. This is the day long promised by God, when life starts over and ordinary human beings experience extraordinary events. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

This gospel’s story of Easter morning and the empty tomb has two parts. The first part concludes with the male disciples returning to their homes. Though the scripture says that the “other disciple,” probably John, believed, it seems that he did not know what to do with his belief. So they went home, having seen an empty tomb but not knowing what it meant.

But Mary, overcome with grief, stayed in the garden near the tomb. She was weeping. Maybe it was her tear-filled eyes which kept her from recognizing that the men in the tomb who spoke to her were angels; or maybe they looked like ordinary people. Maybe it was her sadness which blinded her to Jesus’ appearance next to her and made her presume that he was the gardener; or maybe he had changed enough that only the eyes of faith could see him. Maybe. We’ll never know. We only know that when he said her name, she turned to him, and knew him, and her love was kindled to hold onto him.

Except that it wasn’t time yet for clinging to him. His story wasn’t complete with this happy reunion, the music wasn’t playing and the credits weren’t yet rolling on the screen. This was indeed the day, the moment of transformation for Mary Magdalene, but she had a job to do. She was the first to know, the first to see, and the first to tell the good news. “I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!” she proclaimed to astounded disciples and friends. “I have seen him, he is alive, he is no longer dead! This is the day which the LORD has made!”

Do you know this story? I don't mean "have you heard it before?" I mean do you KNOW this story in your life, in your heart, in your soul? Or is it for you just a story to recall once a year, a story that you accept as the basis for our annual Easter festivities but you don't spend much time thinking about the other 364 days of the year? Does this story make a difference in your life?

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* and more than 20 other books, challenges us to place the resurrection story at the heart of who we are and who we are becoming as spiritual persons. Between accepting Christ as Lord and Savior and our final, eternal destination with God, he says, live the resurrection. He borrows a phrase from poet Wendell Berry, "practice resurrection," and I will borrow it, too. Not like practicing the piano, to learn how to do it, but in the way a doctor practices medicine, as an active pursuit, a vocation. If we are Christian, we practice resurrection. Resurrection faith is our life's work, our life's mission, what we do and who we are. (Peterson, 2006, *Living the Resurrection*, NavPress, Colorado Springs)

What does that mean? Here's a start, a clue from the response of those who saw the empty tomb. Begin with wonder. Let the sense of wonder infect your life. If you are a child, this is probably easy. But sometime around adolescence, "wonder" seems to be replaced by a need to be "cool." And when you're a grown-up, it's even harder to be impressed, to be filled with wonder. But resurrection inspires wonder, and increases wonder. Mary, Peter and John were not cool that morning. They were amazed, even more amazed than when Jesus healed the sick or cast out demons or multiplied loaves of bread. They saw an empty tomb and they saw a dead man walking. So it is when we see the power of life overcoming death. When an alcoholic gives up the bottle, when a widow re-builds her life and goes on, when an ex-con finds a home and a job and a community which embraces him, resurrection is happening and we should be filled with wonder. How did this happen? By the power of a life-affirming God. Praise the Lord! Practice resurrection by letting childlike wonder infiltrate your life. Jesus is alive and he is here with us. There is so much all around us that is wonder-full!

Second, if resurrection faith is our vocation, then it's not reserved for church. It's something to be practiced whenever and wherever. So practice resurrection in the ordinary—at work, at home, at table. At work, there are plenty of opportunities. Instead of criticizing others and cutting them down, dealing small blows of death, try believing in others and seeing their goodness and offering a hand up to those who need it. Instead of pursuing a profit at the expense of others, pursue what will enrich the lives of as many people as possible. Join God in affirming life over death. After all, Jesus is alive! He's alive in our homes and families, too. Look, and you may see his face in the face of one you take for granted. That's not just a gardener, a husband, a wife, son, daughter, mother, father, aunt, uncle, whoever—that is a precious child of God given to you to love. That is Jesus. He is alive! Practice resurrection every time you sit down for a meal, as the followers of Jesus did with him. He is there in the nourishment, he is there in the fellowship, and at the table we know him, as scripture says, in the breaking of the bread. Every meal can be sacramental, a sign of God's grace, if our eyes are open to it. At every meal, we can practice our vocation of resurrection, living with the living Christ. He is here! He is alive!

The third thing about practicing resurrection is to do it daily. Not annually. We eat every day, so we can practice resurrection every day. We live in families and we work and

play every day, so we have opportunities every day to live a resurrection faith. “This is the day the Lord has made” isn’t just a statement about Easter, it isn’t just a way to start Sunday worship, it is an affirmation of life every day. Try this—start your day each morning by reminding yourself “this is the day the Lord has made!” So if you wake up, like yesterday, and it’s snowing like the middle of winter, and you had planned an outdoor Easter egg hunt, think, “this is the day the Lord has made,” and your attitude towards altered plans will likely improve. If you are facing serious illness, or loss, or vocational confusion, you may be learning to take one day at a time. It’s not a bad philosophy for living. But each day is a day that the Lord has made, and is making. In each day, we do not walk alone. Jesus is here, he is alive, he is with us by his Holy Spirit. This Easter day, and the next day and the next, are each days made by the Lord of life, who asks those of us who practice resurrection to join him in the making. For resurrection is about life here in the land of the living, which is not always a pretty place. But with Christ, in the company of others, we are called to take a stand every day for life, and know that in the end, life wins!

This is the day when we begin practicing resurrection. Wendell Berry’s poem I referenced earlier is about alternative farming. But many of his lines apply to all of us, so I’ve picked a few.

Every day do something that won’t compute.
 Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all you have and be poor.
 Love someone who does not deserve it. . . .
 Ask the questions that have no answers. . . .
 Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.
 Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. . . .
 Practice resurrection.

(From “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,”)

This is the day the Lord has made. Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)