

A Sermon for Easter Day, 2014
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

We've been retelling the story of Jesus' last days this week, the awful story of Jesus' hopes for humankind broken as Jesus is disbelieved, betrayed, deserted, abused and executed for the crime of preaching that God desires that our lives be better than they are: richer in love, deeper in fidelity, full of abundance and empty of fear.

And now the story reaches its climax. It's not really a surprise ending (certainly not to us, who know the story well) but it shouldn't have come as a surprise to Jesus' followers either, for Jesus had been telling them what was about to happen over and over again. And yet it seems startling every time we hear it.

Peter, the great naysayer of the gospels, is perhaps the most startled of all. Peter, it seems, is always saying no to Jesus. No to Jesus' foretelling of his death, no to having his feet washed, and finally, as we heard in the Passion gospel, saying no to Jesus in a new way – refusing to admit that he even knew Jesus. I think that Peter's denial of Jesus before his death marked the death of Peter's faith in his own faithfulness. But his confidence that he would never abandon Jesus needed to die so that it could be reborn as Peter's confidence that Jesus would never abandon him. So how utterly unexpected that the first sign of that new faith in Jesus' presence is his absence – the body is missing!

This is the first of many surprises to come in the fifty days that follow that shocking discovery. Once it is clear that Jesus is not where he is supposed to be, he starts popping up in the most unexpected places. He appears first, as we just heard, not to the eleven remaining disciples, but to Mary Magdalene, who, at first doesn't recognize him. After that Jesus shows up in locked rooms, on dusty roads, at a seaside breakfast, doing things we probably wouldn't expect from someone who had just returned from the dead – sharing meals with his friends, leading a traveling Bible study, showing off his scars to his friends like a fifth grade boy.

Even if by some chance we, in the disciples' position, had believed Jesus' assertions that he would rise again – and that's quite a stretch – I mean, you know about the resurrection but if one of your friends or teachers said that she was going to come back to life after three days being dead, what would you think? – even if we had believed Jesus, would we have predicted his return would be so unflashy, so oddly ordinary?

But that is truly the glory of what God has done for us. Jesus' predicted but unpredictable return to life is not just the sign but the reality that new life, abundant life, comes to us not in dramatic displays of awesome power on special occasions or times of great need, but wherever we happen to be. In our ordinary pursuits, in our personal sorrows, in our public wanderings and our private

meditations, Jesus just shows up. Resurrection just happens. Abundant life somehow wedges its way in.

How wonderful is that? It's as if God wants to show us that despite all that power and glory – creating order out of chaos, light out of darkness, parting the Red Sea and sitting on the throne of heaven – despite all that, God is not unimaginably distant, but impossibly near – God is still to be found in the smallest, simplest moments of our daily life – weeping alone, walking with a companion, sharing a meal with friends.

The glory of Easter; what we will recount over the next fifty days and remember throughout the year; is not just the evidence that we will never be abandoned; not by God, not by Jesus, certainly not by the Holy Spirit; but even more, that God's eternal presence is going to keep on surprising and delighting us. Our certainties about the way things are will continue to be challenged, and even shattered. Good will come out of evil. Hope will rise to challenge the power of death. Things we thought forever lost will return, and life will thrust its way into the most barren of places. In the light of resurrection, nothing is what it seems.

Nowadays, it's a truism of our culture that we meet difficulties by "thinking outside the box." But in the glory of resurrection light, we may be able to see that there is, in fact, no box in the first place – our ideas about inside, outside, our side, their side, are meaningless in a world where God's love embraces all.

Similarly, we try to reach common ground in our arguments by recognizing that issues are not all black and white, but contain subtle shades of gray where opposite sides can meet. But in the light of resurrection, that kind of thinking makes no sense, for God reminds us that beyond shades of gray, there are colors! We are not meant to live with one another on the narrow line of reluctant compromise. In the new life God offers us, we are not trapped in the black and white world of 'your way' or 'my way,' but invited into the wide, wild, rainbow of God's way, where there is infinite room, and the very idea of opposite sides stops making sense.

And there's Easter for you. Resurrection, not just for Jesus, but for all of us. The tombs of our own lives, where old hopes and desires, long-abandoned pleasures, broken relationships and hearts have been shut away are opened up, and the corpses of our hearts' desires of how life might have been, so carefully sealed up and left behind, are not to be found there. Hope, no longer captive, is loose in the world, seeking to be reunited with us. Love, released from its bonds, is on the move, looking for us wherever we are journeying or even hiding.

And it is because of this – because of a love so great that God would let nothing stand between us and that love – not our own fear and sorrow, not the blacks and whites and boxes we have made for ourselves, not the powers of the world, not even death itself – that we, sharing that love and knowing that we are giving thanks for our own resurrection, say,

Alleluia! Christ is risen!