

Easter Sunday, 4-1-18
John 20:1-18
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson

“Resurrection on a Thread”

John’s gospel places us in a garden outside Jerusalem early on a Sunday morning. Some of Jesus’ followers are gathered at his tomb. Mary Magdalene was the first to arrive. Discovering the stone cover removed, she has now returned with Peter and another. After ventures into the empty space, the two men return home, leaving Mary alone again. As she weeps, Jesus mysteriously appears whom she only recognizes when he calls her name. Her reaction is to reach out and touch him, perhaps to verify that Jesus is really here, outside the tomb and alive. Her words to the other disciples: “I have seen the Lord.”

There, that morning, in a garden outside of Jerusalem, Jesus appears radically transformed. No longer a body nailed to a Roman instrument of torture and intimidation. No longer a dead body prepared for burial. Jesus is now present. Jesus is alive, with touchable flesh and a recognizable voice. What an unbelievable sight! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of us gathered here this morning could say with Mary, “I have seen the Lord.”

Yet, for many including me, the surprise of the gospel has faded. Still, we want our proclamations of “Christ is Risen”, the beauty of the flowers and the glorious music to bring transformation in our lives and in our world. We hunger for such change. Somewhere in our lives, we yearn for some significant change to occur - an end to strife and cruelty between people, nations and religions.

We are anxious about the deep divisions in our own nation, the absence of civil discourse, increased talk about nuclear arms. For some, our own families are eager for transformation - recovery from addiction, forgiveness of hurtful words and actions, healing around mental health issues.

Thus, we come this Easter Sunday and say: Christ is Risen. Alleluia. We proclaim God has raised Jesus from the power of evil, from the injustice, the distrust of authority, and the failure of friends. Jesus crucified is transformed and ready to meet Mary and the others with forgiveness, peace and love. Yet, as we consider Jesus’ radical transformation from death to life, from darkness to light, from abandonment to union, I wonder: how did Jesus get there and how can we get there?

To answer that question, we need to travel from the garden to the river. To understand Jesus as the risen Christ, we need to go back to Jesus’ baptism. It is on that day that Jesus hears God’s words, “You are my beloved.” With that plunge into Jordan waters, Jesus begins to ground his true center and self in God’s words. Jesus begins to test out what it takes and what it means to stay connected to the truth and power of oneness with God and himself. His path first leads through the temptation to base his life on different descriptions of himself. He is tempted to mask these holy words with who he would be with the world’s power. Next, possessions are offered him as another source of his life. Privilege and honor comes to his attention but, like the other temptations, Jesus holds on to his true center, the love given to him, coming through him, from God.

As his path takes him back across the Jordan and into the world, Jesus walks aware of that love. He intentionally offers others the same love and holy connection. He calls them to follow him. He invites all to his table. He promises community to outcasts and sinners. From the beginning, his healing, parables, forgiveness and confrontation all call to find their own true center in God. Sometimes Jesus calls it the “kingdom”. Or he calls it the “spirit”. Or “living water”. Always, he says “Your true center and connection with God and yourself is within you,” The poet, William Stafford, imagines that true center in this way:

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
Things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you can do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

That’s how Jesus got there in the garden early on Sunday morning. Tragedy happened to him. Evil in all its disguises worked its way, from mighty systems of government and religion to the limitations and failures of human beings. Even Jesus could not “stop time’s unfolding.” Finally, he utters, “it is finished”, breaths his last and gives up his spirit to God. And the thread? What happens to the Jesus’ center, connection, thread?

Both Stafford and I believe “You don’t ever let go of the thread” because the thread is connected to God and God never lets go. Through the darkness of Jesus’ death, through the bleakness of his end, love holds. It is the thread.

So, God, the giver, sustainer and source of true life’s thread, raises Jesus from the dead. God, the presence and power of love, brings about new life. Yes, even radical transformation. This is the Easter proclamation. This is the reason for celebration and gratitude. For through Jesus, God assures us that we are beloved and have within ourselves that same connection with God’s love. It is present always, regardless of our degree of awareness. It is God’s gift to us. As the Persian mystic poet, Hafiz, playfully writes:

God is trying to sell you something, but you don’t want to buy.
That is what your suffering is:
Your fantastic haggling, your manic screaming over the price.

(Immortal Diamond, Richard Rohr, page 62)

But, when we decide to “buy”, we are given a pearl of great price. We uncover our own thread inside of us, just as Jesus tells us and shows us by his life, death and resurrection. Jesus is the first fruit from the dead. We share his same inheritance and we also can experience how beloved we are by God. We can get to the garden. Following Jesus, we can learn how to reject those false illusions that our life is fullest when we believe worldly power, possession and privilege are the source of our life.

When we follow Jesus and practice trusting God, abundant life becomes ours. When we let go of anger, we discover God’s thread of love and find peace. In the place of judgement, God’s thread can lead us to acceptance of another person and circumstances we would not choose. A moment to reconnect with our center can exchange fear to belief in life’s prevailing goodness. When our self-talk threatens to suffocate us, a slow deep breath can open space to hear God’s holy words: You are my beloved.

When our own dark, bleak pieces of life still appear hopeless, we can welcome our pain and grief to sit with God’s thread. Over time, change is possible as God’s love works “more than we can either imagine or accomplish on our own.” The thread of God’s love through Jesus holds and belongs to us. When we find the connection with the thread of God’s Love within, resurrection comes into our lives - as surprisingly and beyond our doing as it came to Mary. This is what God offers us by raising Jesus from the dead. Alleluia. Alleluia.