

“Recognizing the Signs of Resurrection”
John 20:1-18 Acts 10:34-43

One of the signs of Easter this year, at least for those of us who spend most of our time in church circles, is that we are a bit tired this year, and that is because if things have felt a little rushed, it is because they were. This year Easter is the earliest that it has been for 95 years (in 1913). But don't worry because it won't be this early for another 220 years (in 2228).

I know I heard this over 20 years ago in seminary, but I'm a little thick sometimes, and it took Norma Durkee in Bible study this year for it to finally sink in – Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox. Since living here on the Gulf Coast I have begun taking notice of where the sun sets. Since December 22 the sun has slowly been setting each day a little bit further north on the horizon. At the equinox the sun is at its midway point to its journey to its northern extremity which this year will be on June 20. So on March 20, given a clear day, there is an equal amount of day and night. The reason that Easter is also based on a lunar calendar is because of our Jewish heritage. The observance of Passover is based on a lunar calendar. The full moon was Friday evening, so today is Easter.

This sense of timing places our observance of the celebration of Easter and the resurrection securely in the rhythms of this world and the depth of our heritage of faith. Easter is not here just for our convenience; the resurrection is the source of our transformation. The resurrection gives us eyes to see the glory and the substance of God's abiding love in every place and every circumstance of our life.

Have you seen signs of resurrection in your life? Have you looked? Have you expected to see anything? This last week I was looking for signs of resurrection, and I saw one. It is directly across the street. It is on the sign of the Baptist Church. I know, from time to time I ask you if you have noticed the message on our sign, and I don't think I have ever asked you to notice the sign on the Baptist church, but I every time I drove past this week I liked it more and more. It says, **“Every flower of springtime speaks of the resurrection.”**

I just love that sign! I love that message! It is a message of exuberant joy. It is a message of contagious optimism. It is a message of universal hope. The more I have pondered it the more it speaks to me. It actually got me to wondering. What are the flowers of springtime saying? What is their message?

Well, it just so happened that this past Wednesday was Christine and my third anniversary, so I got as much done on Monday and Tuesday as I could and decided to spend all day Wednesday with my wife. We drove down to Sarasota and spent the afternoon at Selby Botanical Gardens. So I had the opportunity to interview a number of flowers. It is an incredible experience to spend time

listening to what flowers have to say. There was a tropical display of orchids that was stunning in its variety of color and nuance intricacy of design. There were bromeliads that cannot be rushed in their blooming but share their beauty over several lunar cycles. Wednesday afternoon there was a blustery wind blowing across Sarasota Bay so the chorus of the flowers and the foliage of the trees was an orchestral festival of joy. They said, “We are so glad to see you! Join in the fun!” That is a very rough translation! You had to be there – you know what I mean? All I can do is to tell you about what I experienced. I can witness to you about it. I can’t experience a conversation with flowers for you; I can only invite you to listen and see.

It is with that kind of openness to experience and sensitivity to observance that I would like us to take a closer look at how the gospel of John tells us of the first sign of the resurrection. The gospel lesson this morning is actually told in two scenes. Mary Magdalene introduces the first. She come to the tomb alone and discovers that the stone has been removed. She then runs to tell Simon Peter and “the other disciple,” the one who Jesus loved. They take over from there. Now remember, this is from the gospel of John and the “other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” is the way that John refers to himself throughout the gospel. At this point he is telling this from his perspective.

He and Peter hear the alarming news from Mary Magdalene, and they immediately set out for the tomb. John is younger; Peter is a bit older. Peter, the fisherman, is a big man; John is thinner built, so he is faster than Peter and he outruns him and gets to the tomb first. Perhaps at least a little bit of competitiveness going on here, so John is the first to see the linens that wrapped Jesus body lying there.

Peter finally gets there, huffing and puffing, but he is bolder and goes right into the tomb, so he not only sees the linens lying there but also the cloth that covered Jesus head, rolled up in a different place. John confirms this, as once Peter goes into the tomb, John follows him as well. They both see the same thing. John says he saw and he believed, but curiously, even in that belief he says that he did not understand the scriptures that he must rise from the dead.

There is no explanation here. There is no transformation. There are no tears. There is no joy. There is not witness. They just leave and return home.. Home is where we go when we need to feel safe. Home is a place where we may be able to avoid what we cannot control.

Remember this is the beloved disciple telling this. He is saying it of himself. I went to the tomb. I got there first. I saw the linens lying there; I was too timid to go into the tomb, but once Peter led the way I followed him and we both saw the other cloth as well, and beyond that, I don’t have an explanation. Maybe we were just numb, but we just went home. “The beloved disciple” is saying that everything else that happened there I had to hear from Mary Magdalene.

It is as if John is saying that he went to Selby Gardens and saw lots of orchids but never appreciated the beauty of the flowers. He missed what was most vital. So as he tells us of Mary's experience I think we can listen carefully for clues to allowing the resurrection to transform our lives.

Mary stayed at the tomb. She gave into her tears. She wept. Of all our emotions, our tears reveal when we are overcome and they often flow most powerfully when we sense that we are powerless and have lost control. Emotionally, it can be like when we are caught outside in a downpour and we can no longer run and we just stand there and get soaked to the bone.

But Mary is asked to go beyond her tears and beyond her emotions. First the two angels ask her why she is crying? Jesus repeats the same question. "Why" is always an intrusive question. What do you mean "why?" It asks us to have the courage to go beyond our feelings and emotions. Why am I hurt? Why am I angry? Why am I disappointed?

The question "why" assumes that there is more to you than what you are feeling. So Jesus asks a further question "whom are you seeking?" We have heard this question before. Jesus asked the two disciples of John the Baptist the same question when they began to follow him. When he was betrayed in the garden Jesus also asked those who came to arrest him the same question. At first Mary, does not recognize him, but everything changes when Jesus says her name, "Mary."

Mary heard the voice of Jesus speak her name to her, "Mary." The voice of Christ will always take you deeper and see more in you than you ever thought possible. The resurrection asks us to have the courage to not be in such a hurry to get back home to our comfort zone, but to take the risk of faith to be drenched by the tears of our powerlessness.

You see, faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not exist just because the Bible says so. Easter faith does not exist just because Jesus is proclaimed. Easter faith is proclaimed because Jesus is alive. The flowers already know that. They don't need to learn it. We do.

47 years ago J B Phillips wrote a book called Your God is Too Small. He suggested an experiment. Pray with all your heart, "William Shakespeare, help me!" and see what happens. "Thomas Edison, help me!" See what happens. As I wrote this sermon, the power went out and the page literally disappeared in front of me. I wanted to pray, "Bill Gates, help me!" Now try this. Pray, "Jesus Christ, help me!" Pray that with all your heart and learn something new about Jesus every week, and see what happens. Jesus is alive and more than anything wants you to hear his voice and wants you to know that his love is within you.

But as personal and intimate as the voice of the risen Christ is to us, Jesus is never a possession to hold on to. Jesus is never a product to be marketed. Jesus is always a relationship that transforms us so that we can hear what the flowers of spring have to say to us. The desire of the risen Christ is to transform us to the degree that we will be able to recognize the power of the resurrection wherever faith takes us. Christ within us is always a relationship to be nurtured and shared.

Earlier I mentioned to you that on Wednesday Christine and I celebrated our third anniversary. As we talked about things that day I learned something new about my wife that I had not known before. What I learned was that at the very beginning of our relationship, in fact right after we had told each other that we loved each other and had decided that we wanted to be married and she said that she would move to the United States to live with me, I left for a few days. What I learned this week was that right after I left the first thing she did was to get out her atlas and to look for where Florida was in the United States. I was amazed to learn this! She had just agreed to move to a place that she didn't know where it was. I thought, "This woman really loves me!"

On this Easter Sunday I want you to know the same thing about Jesus. There is always something more to learn about Jesus. I don't care how long you have had a relationship with him, none of us ever get to the place where we don't have something more to learn about who Jesus is and what he is up to in our lives.

That is what the passage from Acts is all about that we heard read this morning. Peter had been with Jesus through his entire ministry. He was right there on the morning of the resurrection, and he still didn't know all there was to know about Jesus and how much he loves this world.

The passage from Acts is from a sermon that Peter preached in the household of Cornelius. Peter was called to a place that he had never been before to a group of people who he would not normally think of associating with. They didn't look like him. They didn't talk like him. They didn't worship in a way that was at all familiar to him. Their customs were very different from what he was used to. In fact, they ate in a way that he had been told was unclean and just not right.

But when Peter was invited there and witnessed their worship, he learned something new about Jesus. He learned that the Spirit of the Risen Christ was already there. He learned that Jesus had not waited for him to get to Cornelius's house. So Peter looks at all these people and says to them, "I now see that God has no favorites, but in every nation anyone who reverences God is acceptable to God. The door is wide open!"

I challenge each of you to learn something new about Jesus every week! The same Jesus is alive today. The same Jesus is just as patient with us as he was with Peter and the beloved disciple. The same joy is inviting us to join in.

He is risen!
He is risen indeed!
Alleluia!

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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