



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST—EASTER DAY, APRIL 9, 2023
ACTS 10:34-43; PSALM 118; COLLOSIAINS 3:1-4; JOHN 20:1-18

THE DIVINE “NEVERTHELESS”

John 20:1-18 [*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.]*

Greg Hester in the Diocesan Office and I spent no small amount of time working up what we thought would be an appropriate Easter visual for Diocesan communications

office this year. After rejecting a number of options, we ended up choosing a visual of purple tulips emerging from those wonderful dark mounds of Skagit Valley earth under a

cloudy and cold PNW sky. I was proud of this choice because it was an image of the new life we see in this part of the world at this time of the year.

It's a beautiful image, isn't it, and one that strikes us as so believable: the idea that Easter, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, that Easter, is the Christian Church's way of saying that, if we wait long enough, our lives and perhaps human history itself, will on their own, yield new growth. If we wait long enough, what seemed dead, what seemed lost, but was actually dormant, will show itself as still alive again.

But if you think about it, really think about it, the beautiful image of those sturdy flowers emerging from what had been dormant bulbs, that beautiful image, doesn't really capture what we mean when we say that "Christ is Risen" on this day. For the story of the resurrection of Jesus is not a story about Jesus mirroring the world's natural rhythms, about a dormant Jesus sleeping in his tomb and then returning in full flower for the women and then his disciples to see.

No, my friends, the story of the resurrection of Jesus is a much bolder, a much more challenging story than that. The story of Jesus is the story of Jesus dying, actually dying, and then, when he had no agency and no power

to do anything, the story of Easter is the story of Jesus being raised by God from the dead (the passive voice here is intentional!)

It's a terrifying story that changes everything for us. Let me say more.

If we look at the Easter accounts in Scripture, we see little that suggests that Easter is about natural rhythms or patiently waiting for what appears to be new life to emerge in its own time through slow, vegetable growth.

No, the Easter stories we've been given are far more disorienting and terrifying.

Mark writes that when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, they discover the impossible—that the stone has been rolled away and that an angel is sitting where Jesus cold body should have been. Mark tells us later that the women flee in "terror and amazement" unable to say anything to anyone.

In Matthew's Gospel, Matthew adds an earthquake, and an angel that terrifies the guards until they shake and become like dead men.

In Luke's account, the resurrection comes in the form of two men in dazzling clothes that are suddenly standing beside the women in the empty tomb. The women are so terrified that they bow their faces to the ground.

And then finally there's John's Gospel, the one we heard this morning. John describes a mystified and distraught Mary Magdalene encountering someone she assumes is, of all things, the gardener, the midwife of the earth's natural rhythms. But that someone is not a gardener; it's Jesus, raised from the dead. When Mary calls him by a familiar name, Jesus says, "Do not hold on to me," as if to suggest that now, after the resurrection, everything is oriented not toward what is familiar, but toward an entirely new thing.

All of these accounts suggest that the story of the resurrection of Jesus is not the story of our waiting and watching as new life emerges from what lies dormant. No, instead, the story of the resurrection is about the power of God that acts decisively when we have no power within us, the power of God to open the tombs of our lives and to raise up all in us and in the world that has been extinguished, killed off, entombed, made desolate, left in despair. The resurrection is not natural at all, but discontinuous, disruptive, definitive, and saving. It should leave us speechless and disoriented for, by definition, it comes to us as something completely unexpected and unexplainable. The resurrection has no analog!

Swiss theologian Karl Barth once put it this way: the Gospel, he said "is not a natural 'therefore' but is a divine 'nevertheless'."

Recently at the home of a friend who is a young mother, I was introduced to her son Jack. Jack is a toddler on the cusp of post-toddlerhood, full of curiosity, energy, intelligence and daring. This means that his mother routinely talks to him about a thing called "limits." And so Jack has heard about limits on what he can touch and what he cannot touch. Jack has heard about limits on where he can go and where he cannot go. Jack has heard about limits on what he can eat and what he cannot eat. During my visit, Jack's mother had to remind him of some of these limits, something she did kindly and patiently. And to his credit, Jack had taken these reminders well and had gone back to playing in his room quietly while the two of us continued to talk. However, a few minutes later we heard weeping coming from the little boy's room, the kind of weeping one would expect from a small person bereft of something important. We both went in to check on him, and there was Jack, sitting in the middle of his room crying, crying, and repeating through his tears: No limicks! No limicks!"

In a strange sort of way this is what the resurrection of Jesus is saying to us: No

limits! No limits! No limits on what the power of God can do in our lives, in this Church of ours, in the city of Seattle, in this country we live in, on this planet we love. No limits, for Jesus the Christ has been raised from the dead.

No limits, and I would add no logic--no logical “therefore,” a word we use to bridge one thing that must necessarily and naturally follow from another; no logical “therefore” but instead a divine, discontinuous, disruptive, definitive, and saving “nevertheless.”

And so, if you’re grieving the loss of something or someone so important to you that it feels like your death, the resurrection of Jesus says: Nevertheless, life

If you’re locked away in a comfortable tomb of your own making or a restrictive tomb created by unjust limits put on you by others, the resurrection of Jesus says: Nevertheless, liberation.

If you feel paralyzed by something that has happened to you in the past, the resurrection of Jesus says: Nevertheless, healing. Nevertheless, forward motion.

If you feel dry and desolate like a desert wasteland, the resurrection of Jesus says: Nevertheless, joy.

And, finally, if you’re in despair over our politics, over the state of race relations in our country, or over the future of the earth, itself, the resurrection of Jesus says: Nevertheless, hope.

It’s not easy to say these things, because everything in me, everything in us, wants to follow the logic of “therefore,” wants to go down, go down into that lonely pit where reasonable and inexorable logic would lead us.

But on this day, on Easter, God is telling us a different story. It’s the story of God’s very self in Jesus who suffered all that this life of ours could throw at him. The story of God’s very self who, nevertheless, was not only not overcome by it but who was victorious over it.

And so, no limits, no limits on the power of God. And through this, no limits, no limits on what you and I can be, what you and I can do.ⁱ

ⁱ *Works Cited or Consulted:*

Ted Wardlaw and Barbara Brown Taylor both developed the idea that the resurrection is

“unnatural”—the former in an article in *The Christian Century* and the latter in an Easter sermon.