

April 1, 2018

Title: Look Up

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Easter and April Fool's Day don't often fall on the same day. In fact, the last time it happened was just before my 6th birthday. But maybe it should happen more frequently.

This year, Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent was on February 14th – the day we celebrate love. Can you think of a better day to begin Lent – to begin a time of intentionally reflecting upon our relationship with God and God's great love for us? So, we started Lent on Valentine's Day and we end it on April Fool's Day. It makes me think that God really does have a sense of humor.

It is easy for us to become so accustomed to the Easter story and the story of Jesus, that it can be easy to forget how foolish they may seem to others.

On the day we call Good Friday, it looked like God had been defeated. Jesus was dead. The Jewish authorities and the Roman Government wanted him killed because he threatened their wellbeing and status quo.

His followers were devastated. They had believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would bring them freedom from Roman oppression. Their high hopes and optimism were crushed when Jesus was arrested and killed.

There are times in our lives when it feels as if everything good has come to an end; times when we feel that we have no hope, no future. We may drag ourselves through life, going through the motions, but with no

energy or hope – much like Mary Magdalene did that morning. She probably approached with her head lowered in defeat and grief as she came to the tomb in search of a dead body. She came to anoint her teacher and to mourn a death that broke her heart. But out of her great love for Jesus, she did what she needed to do.

It didn't seem like things could get any worse, but when she arrived at the tomb, the rock in front of it had been moved and the tomb was empty. The only explanation that made sense to her was that insult had been added to injury – someone had stolen Jesus' body.

She ran to get two of Jesus' disciples and to give them the bad news. Peter and the other disciple saw the empty tomb and then left. Mary stayed around and questioned the man she thought was the gardener. When he spoke her name, she recognized him as Jesus and the world suddenly came back to life.

Can you even begin to imagine what that must have been like? Suddenly, she was face to face with the teacher and friend she loved. This was beyond any possibility she could have imagined. Suddenly, the grief that had pierced her heart was gone. Jesus was not dead. He was alive.

Suddenly the hate and fear of the Roman and religious authorities were no longer the winners. The grief and sadness of Jesus followers were no longer the reality. It is as if, God let out a loud laugh and shouted, "April Fools" – hate is not the winner – love is! God took what looked like defeat and turned it into the greatest victory! In ways that humanity could not have foreseen, the world was changed!

The cross, an instrument of torture and shame, in God's hands became a symbol of victory. Suddenly, death was no longer the winner. Surprise! Jesus' resurrection took away the power of death to have the last

word. Many of us know the pain and sadness of experiencing the death of someone we love. But that pain and sadness are really for us – for our sorrow that we will no longer be with that person. Yet, in Christ’s resurrection, we have the promise that God is on both sides of death. God is holding our hands, in our pain and sorrow, and giving us comfort, promise, and hope. At the same time, God is with our loved one who has died, embracing that person in arms of love.

I have had the privilege of being with quite a few people as they have approached death. I have often watched as those who are confident of God’s love have been peaceful, ready to reach out and take God’s hand outstretched in love.

We have the promise that nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love of God. I remember one woman especially, who said to me, “Do you hear them? Aren’t they beautiful? They’re singing #44.” #44 was a song called “Mansion over the hilltop.” She knew that God was preparing a place for her and she was ready. Death does not have the last word – God does.

In God’s great sense of humor, the first person to see the empty tomb was Mary Magdalene, a woman. In a time when women were not even considered reliable witnesses in a legal dispute, the first person to see the risen Christ was a woman. The first person to tell anyone else about this great miracle was a woman, as Mary Magdalene returned to the disciples and announced, “I have seen the risen Lord.”

Jesus lived his life and ministry among normal everyday people; people without power or influence. He spent most of his time with those the world considered the last, the lost, and the least – and now when the greatest miracle of all took place – when death was conquered – the first

person to learn about this was a woman. God does, indeed, have a sense of humor. God laughs at the way the world does things and says, “Hey, look! I have a different way. A better way. Pay attention!”

One of the great truths of Easter is that Jesus Christ conquered death. His resurrection took away the power of death to have the last word. God proclaimed that love is the answer, love is always the winner. The world proclaims that the one with the most weapons wins; the one with the most power, the strongest, the one with the most money, the one who yells the loudest, the one who can intimidate, and bully is the one who wins. But God says, while it may look initially like they win – that is only an illusion. Easter comes along and reminds us that ultimately evil does not have a ghost of a chance. God’s truth and love are the most powerful things in the world.ⁱ

On Good Friday, evil had its best chance to defeat God and could not do it. The Good News is that God wins! You cannot kill the things of God. “They will not die! They cannot be defeated. You may push them down for a while, but they resurrect! They rise again! They survive! They endure to the end of time.”ⁱⁱ

In many ways, the world would consider Jesus to be a fool. He “embraced laying down power, rather than grabbing it and holding on tightly. His teachings and his example of love are often seen as unrealistic in a world of competition, untenable in a world of greed and violence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

On Easter, we celebrate and proclaim that the ways of the world are not the ways of God. God can turn our sorrow into joy. God can turn our defeats into victories. God can turn our despair into hope as God did for Mary Magdalene and Jesus’ followers. God can, and does, do the same for

use. Easter can give us a new hope, a new purpose, a new identity as God's beloved children.

God invites us to "look up" from the pressures of life, from the things that weigh us down and to see new possibilities in Christ. When the man she thought was the gardener spoke her name, Mary Magdalene was invited to "look up" and see the face of Jesus, the face of God.

We are invited to "look up"; to look up from our complacency, from our apathy, fear, and depression about "the way things are" and be filled with the promise of new life and hope. When we surrender to God those things that we cannot change, we can discover that surrendering leads to resurrection and new life. When we "look up" we can see new possibilities that we did not see before – new ways of responding to the circumstances of life, new ways of being, new life, new hope, resurrection.

On Friday, the Jewish and Roman authorities thought they had won. But on Sunday, God had the last laugh. Jesus had been raised from the dead! Life overcame death! Light overcame darkness! Love had the last word!

Jesus promises to always be a home for us – a place where we are never alone – even when it may feel otherwise. The Scriptures of the Easter season speak time and again of the family of God, of loving one another as brothers and sisters, as children of God. We are invited to reside, to live in the presence of the Risen One. During worship in the next few weeks, we will be exploring what it means to have a place to call home in our spiritual lives.

But for today, let us rejoice in a joke gone right. Let us be aware that the joy of Easter is tinged with notes of hilarity; that God made a fool of

death and evil and that God and love are always the winner. He is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Rejoice!

ⁱⁱ Moore, James W. The Common People Heart Him Gladly, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2004, p.65

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.66

ⁱⁱⁱ Finley, Jeanne Torrence, www.ministrymatters.com "Easter and April Fools"