

Wesley United Methodist Church
Easter
April 12, 2020
Title: A Day of Resurrection
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1-6
Matthew 28:1-10

Some of us have heard the Easter story so many times that we think we know it so well that nothing can surprise us. It's hard for us to recapture the amazement that the women felt that morning when they found the tomb empty. That's one reason that I try to be intentional about reading commentaries and engaging with others in discussion of the scripture.

This year, Marcia McFee from the Worship Design Studio noted not only that the stone had been rolled away but that an angel was sitting on the stone. It is from this observation that she suggested the idea of gathering stones and naming the stones or the heavy and hard things that we are carrying right now. She also suggested, what I want to suggest to you, that you take the stone and decorate it using paint or markers or whatever you have available and turn it from a stone of worry into a stone of hope and belief and promise. Remember that in Matthew's gospel that we heard earlier, Jesus says to the women, "Do not be afraid."

Jesus still speaks that message to us today, "Do not be afraid."

I have here another stone that I am going to use to replace my worry stone. It is polished and it says, "Believe." We gave these out at church some time ago, and it is going to be in a prominent place where I can be reminded whenever concerns start to overtake me that you and I do not need to be afraid, We can believe instead of fear.

Jesus continued by telling the women that he was going into Galilee and that the disciples would see him there. In the gospels we have about

10 different accounts of the disciples and others seeing Jesus after the resurrection.

At the same time, we have one of the earliest reported accounts of “fake news”. Matthew’s gospel continues from where we left off to tell us that the guards went to tell the Chief Priests and the Elders what had happened. They gave the guards money and told them to say that Jesus’ disciples came at night and stole his body while they were sleeping. They promise that if the Roman governor heard about it, they would protect the guards and support their story. Matthew concludes by saying that this report has spread throughout all Judea to this very day.

We celebrate Easter because we believe that Jesus did appear to his disciples after his death and resurrection. We celebrate Easter because we believe in the miracle of transformation that took a group of scared men and women and transformed them into people who spoke boldly and were even willing to be killed for their beliefs. We celebrate Easter because we have experienced resurrection in our own lives and in the lives of others in many different ways.

Out of death, God brought life. The Easter message is that death does not have the last word. Fear, despair, worry do not have the last word. Life, and love, and God have the last word. If we open our eyes, we can see signs of resurrection and new life throughout scripture and in our lives today.

This week, a woman I knew in Maine posted a picture on Facebook of some crocuses in her yard. There wouldn’t be anything really unusual in that because there are lots of people posting pictures of crocuses, daffodils and other flowers growing out of what often looks like dead earth. They are one of the first signs of spring and we look for them every year.

What was very unusual was what she said about them. She wrote, “60 (six zero) years ago I received three small boxes of crocus bulbs. Six years ago, we found them in a box, in the attic, at my mother’s home, when we were readying it for sale after her death. This past fall I planted them... all three boxes- this spring they came up! I did not know that was possible!!”ⁱ

My immediate response was that this was a wonderful example of resurrection – of new life coming out of something that not only looked dead, but after 60 years I would never have imagined that they could still grow when planted in the ground.

Her post got me thinking and I decided to walk around the yard at the parsonage. Many of you know that I am really not good at dealing with plants. Every year I buy a couple of plants for Easter, always planning to plant them and have beautiful flowers but I usually forget and I end up throwing them away. When I walked around to the back of the house I found a brave daffodil (insert picture) growing out of the hard ground. As you can see it’s not exactly in the middle of a beautiful garden, but it is a sign of new life, new growth, and resurrection for me.

Johnna read a passage of scripture to us from the prophet Jeremiah. The people to whom Jeremiah was speaking had been going through a time of great trauma. They had been forced to live in exile in a country that was not theirs. They despaired of ever seeing their land again. Jeremiah tells them that they **will** feel joy again and that they will be able to plan for the future. He is very clear with them that their situation will continue for a while – long enough that they should settle in and plant vineyards on the hills of the land where they were living. But there would come a time when they would be able to return to their home.

I'm sure that they would have preferred to hear that they would be returning home soon, but Jeremiah did not mince words. He told them the truth even when it was not something they wanted to hear. Still in the midst of what they didn't want to hear, there was a promise of joy and a future that would bring them back home.

When I listen to Governor Raimondo or others speaking during this pandemic, I sometimes think of Jeremiah. Governor Raimondo frequently acknowledges that what she is saying is not what people want to hear but it is what will get us to a day when we will once again be shopping in stores and celebrating Easter in crowded sanctuaries.

We are starting to hear about flattening the curve in some places and in a few places around the world, things are starting to loosen up again and it is becoming safer to be out and about. Today, on Easter, I think that those are signs of resurrection – signs of new life.

Some of you know that I have been looking at places to live in retirement and you may know that just about two months ago purchased a condominium. Amidst extra precautions the closing took place two weeks ago with only the attorney and me in an office with gloves and with him wearing a mask. As I went through that day, I found myself thinking about Jeremiah.

In another section, Jeremiah is told by God to purchase a field and to put the deed in a sealed clay jar where it would be safe for many years. It was a message to Jeremiah from God that the day would come when he and the people would again live on their land and would again farm and produce crops in their homeland.

The day of the closing, I felt a little like Jeremiah. I was signing the papers and becoming the owner (with the bank, of course) of a piece of

property, a new home, not knowing when I would be able to move into it or what the future would hold. But it was a sign and message of hope. In the middle of uncertainty, I have now engaged a mover and anticipate moving in two weeks.

The uncertain future can be very scary. People like me – and maybe like you – like to think we have some control over what is happening. We don't like it when we don't have answers or when we can't have some reasonable certainty of the outcome of things and how we are going to get there.

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many of us to learn new ways of doing things. As a church, we were looking at how to respond to the future and how to be the church in a world where people don't necessarily move into an area and immediately start looking for a church where they will stay for many years.

The world has changed; but often we, in the church, have not changed. COVID-19 has forced us to learn how to do some of the things we were only talking about before. I've never pastored during a pandemic before and quite frankly I don't like seeing myself in pictures, but we are all learning new technology. We are being forced to look at a new way of doing the things that we value, and we are learning once again how much we appreciate the things that we often have taken for granted.

On the other side of this, church will look different than it did even 6 weeks ago. On the other side of this many things may look different and we may discover that we like some of the new ways that we have been doing things as well.

I desperately miss seeing my grandchildren – but now I am spending time on Zoom reading with them, talking with them and playing with them.

I miss all the things I would prefer to do with them in person, but for now there is a new way of doing the things that are important to us.

This pandemic is already feeling old and I would love to wake up tomorrow and find out that it is over, but I don't think that's going to happen; so in the meanwhile, we look to the new things that God is able to do in our midst. We look at new ways of being together. We look at new ways of cherishing each other. We look at new ways of being church. We look at new ways of understanding that our world is intimately connected in ways that many of us may not have really understood before.

The Easter message is that God is always doing a new thing. God brings new life out of even 60-year-old crocus bulbs, or daffodil bulbs thrown in the ground and forgotten. God brings new life out of places that feel like exile or places that are fearful.

Fear, despair, worry, and even COVID-19 do not have the last word. The promise of hope, the gift of new life in Christ, the love of God, and the promise of God's presence with us triumph over all of these.

Let us pray.

God of new dawns, new awakenings, new life,
we hear your voice this morning saying,
"I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love.
With unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself."
On this Easter day, you tell us we will be rebuilt and made new.
In gratitude we hear you, Living God, and we believe you.
And so we will celebrate the gift of new life in Christ,
even in the midst of fear.
You give us eyes to see through tears,
songs to sing with throats tight with emotion.
We know you help the weary rise up out of the ashes.
Give us the courage to be your light and hope in this world today.
Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Marcia McGee on Facebook, April 7, 2020

ⁱⁱ Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio. “With Glad Hearts” released for this pandemic and used by permission.