

SIGNS OF RESURRECTION ©

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly
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Based on 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 towards 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.

“Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed” say trumpets round the world this morning.

This is God’s day as no other is God’s day.

God says YES to all of humanity’s NO.

But how do we know the old story is true? The Bible doesn’t describe it. Nobody witnessed it. The whole town saw Jesus die, but only some crazed women and a few fanatics met him – alive again. Every year since, someone has asked why Christ didn’t appear to Caiaphas or to Pilate – to set the record straight. Wouldn’t that have cleared up a lot?

We don’t know if it was a nice warm Palestine morning, ‘just perfect’ like today. We don’t know if the birds stopped their singing or if heaven trumpeted as he burst the tomb, or if Jesus came out like Lazarus – slowly unwrapping his shroud, squinting with wonder at the new dawn.

No one gets to be an eyewitness, only a seer of signs (I love that word SEER – so wise!) Oh, to be a see-er!

Signs – they’re always personal, unique, no two alike. One of us believes, another not. Part of us believes, another part, not so much. One runs off to share the good news, but most of us just go back to familiar turf.

I

This is God’s first Easter morning. We’ve all just arrived. And here we are together with never-before neighbours before the wonder of this day.

Mary’s here: she arrives first – early, while it is still dark – and sees that the stone has been rolled away. But any bunch of muscled zealots can do that! Running to the rest of us, she cries, “They have taken the Lord away; we don’t know where they’ve laid him.”

The “other disciple” arrives next, presumably John, since only the gospel that bears his name calls him ‘the one whom Jesus loves’ and the ‘other disciple.’ He wins the footrace to the tomb. But he doesn’t go in, just bends low, and has a good look. Sure enough – no body, just as Mary said, also linen cloths neatly folded! Maybe Jesus liked things neat; who knew? But – what body-snatcher tidies up?

Then comes Peter. And when he’s caught his breath, he goes inside and has a good look around – no body, just linens, also the small cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head – rolled up in a place by itself. Neat!

Different signs for different people! Why does John see one piece of linen, and Peter two? Why does John believe – and Peter not?

Signs of Resurrection are always unique and personal.

One feels a brush of angel wings and senses a dear one near; another doesn’t even want to hear about it.

One finds a quiet bench in a garden, closes her eyes and listens to birds rejoice in spring – and is spirited into new life.

One catches his child in birth’s miracle.

Another hikes the Don Valley – and discovers Resurrection in a hidden crevice where stubborn green shoots grow out of rock.

What is Resurrection for you? Bruce and I once asked a Bible Study group.

To one, it was assurance that those who’ve gone before are still close, and will meet us on the other side. But this was true for people long before Jesus, still true for lots of people – of all faiths – and none.

To one, Resurrection meant getting up in the morning and knowing, whether the sun was shining or not, that life was worth living.

One spoke of the innate ‘power for life’ that presses snowdrops (tiny white harbingers of spring) through winter’s remnant crust.

To another, Resurrection was about God's unlimited imagination, creation, and re-creation.

All we know for sure is that Resurrection is not limited to any season or date on the calendar, or to those who some would call 'worthy', not limited by anything else in all of creation.

II

Signs of Resurrection are always around. It's our humanity that shrouds our seeing.

Peter can't see them because he's too busy replaying 'if only' (you know that game):

– the courtyard, "I do not know the man."

– the cock crows ... and 3 times!

– the pain in Jesus' voice as he stood before Pilate, the sound of the whip, the roar of the crowd, his words from the cross ... while Peter did nothing. (If only – what if – I'd gone to the doctor earlier, if I'd listened, if I'd not taken that road.) Peter couldn't see Signs of Resurrection if they were neon! The gospel says: He does not believe; he just goes home.

John has been at the cross to the end, his heart breaking with every mocking word and jabbing sword and sour-vinegar taunt. This 'one who Jesus loves best' (says that gospel) receives Jesus' mother as his own.

Here he stands, Signs of Resurrection right in front of his eyes, just like Peter. And John believes. What he believes, we know not, for it says, "As yet he does not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead." But, just like Peter, John also goes home!

Mary never goes inside the tomb, but stands outside weeping – for all good things, all hopes and dreams that have died. Mary weeps the tears of all who have ever grieved, her heart breaking wide open. Unconsoled by angels, oblivious to Christ who attends, absorbed by her own pain, she sees no Signs of Resurrection.

Weeping hearts in a Good Friday world of tombs of personal pain – on grates outside – in African huts dying of AIDS, orphaning children to grandmothers.

Easter always begins in dark places!

Poet Wendell Berry says:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

to know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,

and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,

and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

Mary, in her dark, sees two angels in white sitting where her Lord's body has been, one at the head, one at the foot. Have they helped raise him – prepared his Light-filled soul to return to the holy realm from whence it had come? They speak to her one of Jesus' favourite words – Woman.

III

Angels speak, as they always do, directly to the centre of our sorrow, at the core of our being. "Woman, why are you weeping?"

And Mary throws herself into words – that tumble all over themselves. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" – just like we frantically try to find words that make sense of – a fatal car accident (it can't be real; he's driven that road all his life), a heart attack of a healthy jogger (but she runs 5 miles a day), cancer in a 2-year-old (it can't be true; it isn't fair.) Whenever chaos breaks through the protective wall of impossibility and disbelief that we build around our mind to keep us sane – there is incredulous tumbling.

In one word, it all changes. “Mary.” And she “turns around” – yes, physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. One Sign of Resurrection breaks through to her (all it takes is one), and her world is born anew.

“MARY” – and the ‘stone of unknowing’ is rolled away. No more need to explain. She knows by faith that it’s all in God’s hands – all in God’s good order. Resurrection!

“MARY – Bill, Karen, Don, Susan, Bob, Ellen, you, and you. God knows your name, the name of every one of us. There is no wall of grief or dis-ease or disbelief that can keep God out – not the worst terror or dread – nothing in all of creation. However heavy is the stone in your heart, God can (and will) roll it away.

“Mary.” “Teacher, Rabbi.” Like trumpets in the morning, Hope rises and leaps forward, no time for backward looking tears.

“Do not hold me.” And Jesus backs away from hands that want to hold tight to the moment, tight to the way it has been. “Do not hold me! It’s not about that. It’s a new day! Get going! Go tell my friends.”

In Matthew, Jesus says, “Tell them I am going on ahead; I will see you on the road.” In Luke, it is on the road to Emmaus, as they walk and talk together, that they recognize him. It is always “on the way, on the road”, not sitting at home moping, lost in tears or fears, but “on the road” that we find Resurrection. “Get going,” Jesus says.

IV

Mary takes to the road, and has never stopped. The first seeker, she becomes the first witness. “I have seen the Lord. He is risen! He is going ahead of us.” This is the sign: we will see him on the road.

What do Signs of Resurrection look like on roads that wind through refugee camps, war with child soldiers, prison cells, locked wards in nursing homes, neo-natal ICU, divorce court, bankruptcy, unemployment, tent cities? Dr. Bob Hilliard will be in this pulpit 3 weeks from today; listen then for Signs of Resurrection that he’s seeing in pediatric wards in Ethiopia right now.

All I know is: if we want to see Jesus in this Good Friday world, we have to go to where the crosses are. We have to go – and stretch our hearts and hands and cares and prayers where Jesus is still being crucified.

“Where did we see you hungry and feed you? or thirsty and give you drink? Where did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?” (Mt 25) Recognized, unrecognized, there he is – on the road – ahead of us – calling us to come, to follow his way! “I say to you; as you do it to one of the least of these, you do it to me.”

Christians in the early church whispered the Good News to one another – cell to cell, up dungeon stairs, on the path to the lion’s den, eyes blind with tears and tombs and fragile hope. Christos (Greek for “Christ”) was personally alive in their everydays, guiding, strengthening, standing with them as they faced down Empire. It was Christos (say official records) that Nero sent secret police to find – to bring in – so he could kill him. Silly Nero; the world already tried that; it can’t be done!

“Go tell my friends,” he says, “I am going on ahead of you; come, follow.”

I wonder; can Judas hear this invitation? You know where he is. In anguish, because he’s made a big mistake that can’t be undone – betrayed Jesus in the garden (and with a kiss) – he’s hanged himself, and gone to hell. Early creeds say that Jesus has also “descended into hell.”

Picture the two of them meeting down there. Does Jesus kiss Judas this time? Does he ask Judas the same question he asked him before? “Friend, why are you here?” Does Judas (and every person who has ever made unretrievable mistakes and descended into dark pits) know that the Good News is for them? Can they hear Jesus’ “Follow me”?

I pray that be true! For Jesus knows the way out – yes, out of hell. There is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God that we know through Christ Jesus. Let this affirmation of faith be a Sign of Resurrection for you – this day.

Now you go tell the Good News – to all of Jesus’ friends – those who have lost their way, who are lonely or hurting – and to those who are happy, or holy. Tell it to yourself! Signs of Resurrection line the road; they’re everywhere.

Some of us see angels, others empty tombs. Some believe, some not. Some of us hear our name, others only old familiar Easter Sunday words.

It matters not! Christ is risen anyway! Thanks be to God! AMEN