

April 1 Easter Sunday COMMUNION

John 20: 1-18

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." ³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying. ¹¹ Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. ¹³ The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

As painful as Jesus' death was for those who followed him and loved him, they knew how to deal with death. They knew how to handle a dead body, they knew it needed a grave and they knew that it wanted anointing and preparation. That's why the ladies went to where Jesus had been laid. They went to do the ritual preparation of the dead body – one last act of caring for a loved one.

But they didn't know what in the world to do with the first April Fool (I had to get it in here somewhere).

It's clear in all of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teaching that Jesus told his disciples that he would be raised to new life after his death. It's also pretty clear that not a one of them believed him. Every one of them was surprised, shocked, and even scared because he did exactly what he said he would do.

Sometimes the victory of Easter and the empty tomb is exactly like that for us today as we live our lives of faith. We know what to do with broken things, messed up things, and even dead things. We know how to feel the pain, try and cope with the hurt, and even bury that which was once vital and alive (a relationship, a job, a friendship, a dream) and let it go forever.

But what can really throw us for a loop is when we trust God with our broken, painful, dead things and God does exactly what God says he will do – resurrect and bring new life.

At the beginning of our journey to this day through the season of Lent, Kyle and I offered up a song called "*Beautiful Things*" that has whispered its truth through my mind and heart for all of these 46 days from Ash Wednesday and the sign of repentance until now, the day of new beginnings, beautiful flowers and empty graves. For those who didn't hear it or could use a reminder, the words were simple:

*All this pain; I wonder if I'll ever find my way
I wonder if my life could really change, at all
All this earth; Could all that is lost ever be found?
Could a garden come out from this ground, at all?
 You make beautiful things; You make beautiful things out of the dust
 You make beautiful things; You make beautiful things out of us
All around, Hope is springing up from this old ground
Out of chaos life is being found, in you
 You make beautiful things; You make beautiful things out of the dust
 You make beautiful things; You make beautiful things out of us
You make me new, You are making me new
You make me new, You are making me new*

The cross with all its pain, and the empty tomb with all its victory, are both essential for the story, the reality, of our faith. Without the resurrection to new life, Jesus was just a heck of nice guy who died for no good reason. But the cross was never the end of the story. Jesus knew that. Jesus didn't die to pay the debt of our sin because he was a glutton for punishment or even because he had a natural love for us.

Jesus died on that cross, gave his life, laid it down, because as horrible as it was, he was willing to do it to pay our way into the glorious and holy presence of God Almighty. And Jesus knew it was merely the dramatic climax of the story. The end of the story wasn't on the first day, but on the third day - to rise up out of that grave and enjoy new life with God, his Father.

For the whole story, the whole plan, the whole truth of God to be manifest, made real, Jesus had to die because new life isn't possible until after death.

We live in a culture that has come to accept that things claiming to be New! really aren't. Cereal boxes and soda cans and things change their packaging on a regular schedule. They keep changing to outsiders to grab our attention and to have the appearance of newness, but the stuff on the inside is still the same old recipe! And for our favorite overly processed foods that's fine, but I think living in such a world where marketing is sneaky like that we become so skeptical about the face value of anything.

And I think that is why resurrection and being made new surprises the heck out of even life-long Christians every single time. As humans, we have limited capacity to see and know and understand. It can be impossible to imagine new life coming from the ashes of things gone wrong. That's what makes faith, faith. Believing without full knowing or seeing or understanding is the act of faith.

To be fair, we, humans, have this thing about endings. Endings are very hard for us. There is such fear about what is next. Even when what is next is planned out – college, marriage, a new job, a new home – there is still sadness and fear about what the future will be like.

Spoiler alert: bad stuff is going to keep happening. This is not news. Bad stuff has been happening ever since Cain killed Abel, and we are just lucky that God promised to never again flood the earth and just start. That's Noah's Ark and all that. People were so awful that God just washed it away and pretty much went back to the drawing board.

But God knew long before that time that we would never be able to save ourselves, so, Jesus. But not just Jesus dead. Also Jesus raised to new life as the first among all who will be raised to new life. A visible, tangible promise to be seen and received and held onto. A new life out of the ashes of death.

This resurrection is ours, too. But it is not just the resurrection that we will one day experience in the New Heaven and New Earth. Being made new is another way to look

at our entire earthly existence once we have accepted Jesus' death paid for our sin (which includes recognizing that we are sinners, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God), and have committed to living intentionally into our restored relationship with our holy God.

Yet, for all the truth and beauty that is being made new in each of our individual lives, and just as Jesus was resurrected quite recognizably as Jesus into his eternal body – right now Jesus is alive on this earth in us, in the church.

We are the resurrection, the new life, the embodied Savior, today as the church. We may or may not always look that alive and vital, but that is the reality of our creation. God is always making things new – making you new, making me new, making us new.

And just like in the family you have grown up in or are in right now – family isn't always pleasant, doesn't always behave well, doesn't always agree on everything, but is still always family, still always belonging to each other, still loving each other through good and bad. And one way or another still always growing and expanding, living and dying and changing.

And just like Mary and the other disciples who were so very sad that Jesus wasn't dead where they left him, sometimes it is sad to think that life isn't what it used to be, but once our eyes are opened and we see Jesus being completely true to exactly what He said he would do, it changes our entire outlook.

God is still good. Jesus is still alive. Hope is still firm. And the church is still you and me and everybody who believes.

We affirm this good news today by celebrating Communion. Communion isn't just a reminder of Jesus dying for each of us as individuals. When the one loaf and the one cup is received into each of us, we once again, embody Christ and bring him vital and alive into the world.

As the beloved hymn says:

You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!

And now, let us prepare to share in the embodiment of Jesus our Risen Lord..