



Called by Name

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday*

Happy Easter! I want to personally thank each of you for coming here today because I know that there are lots of other options for Sunday morning, even on Easter. You could be sipping Starbucks and reading the paper or sleeping. I know that some of us here today are here because it is the thing to do on Easter and Christmas and we still want some connection to church, maybe for reasons we aren't sure about or only distantly feel. On Easter Sunday we celebrate the very heart of the way of Jesus, the thing around which everything else revolves, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. This mystery is the DNA of Christian faith. There was a 20th century theologian named Lesslie Newbigin who put it this way:

The story begins with the vast explosion of love, joy and hope released into the world by the resurrection from the tomb of the crucified and rejected Jesus. The shock waves of that explosion spread within a few years to all the quarters of the compass.¹

Whatever happened that first day of the week long ago, it did indeed have an enormous effect in the world. Twelve cowardly disciples very quickly became countless people steeped in the joy of love that is stronger than death and that leads to life and more life and more life.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

But what are we supposed to make of the resurrection today? How are we supposed to relate to it in the 21st century world? Some think the literal resurrection is nonsense, and others say you can't be a real Christian unless you're convinced beyond any doubt that it actually happened exactly the way the Bible describes it.

And maybe that leaves a lot of us scratching our heads and thinking, it might be better to just stick with Easter egg hunts and a fabulous Easter feast and a beautiful church service that if we're honest feels more like theatre or a good show at the museum than anything real. But I think we want resurrection to be true. We want hope beyond death and violence. We want to know that when someone picks up a child and throws him over the edge of a railing at the Mall of America that this kind of violence will not have the last word. This month, April 2019 is the 20th anniversary of the Columbine school shooting and the 25th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Tomorrow is Earth Day when we celebrate the earth and seek to reverse the ways consumer society is destroying ecosystems and species and affecting climate itself. In this context we want to know that there will be an end to brutality and the power of evil and selfishness. If we are honest we want the resurrection to be real, we want to know that the nonviolent power of God in Christ cannot be defeated by any cruelty or greed – that God can give us life beyond our own capacity. But what can give us faith like that?

Here's the thing. I think the disciples felt exactly the same way we did that first day of the week when their world had been shattered and their anguish was beyond bearing. When they came to the tomb, Jesus didn't come running to them with arms wide open like a scene out of the Sound of Music. They arrived at the tomb and the stone was rolled away, but that was it. They walked in and saw the graveclothes lying around, but that's hardly proof of anything either.

All they knew for sure, at first, was that there was a missing body. Neither they nor anyone else actually saw Jesus rise from the dead. Scripture doesn't describe that. So they were confused, and troubled, and all they could do was to go back home and sort of mentally short circuit. They didn't know what to do with the empty tomb any more than we do when we encounter it. THAT's how Easter began.

What broke it all open was Mary Magdalene. She wouldn't leave. And I think we can all understand her. She had just had to watch her beloved Jesus die a horrifying and traumatic death which she was utterly powerless to prevent. So the one thing she could do was finally to treat his brutalized body with the tenderness he had deserved all along but not received. So there was no power on earth that was going to stop her from trying to care for his body. But neither she nor the disciples could find him. So she stayed there, weeping. She couldn't do what she came there for, but she couldn't leave either. She was stuck.

She is in what St. Ignatius of Loyola would call a state of desolation. St Ignatius was an ecstatic mystic who founded the Jesuits in the 16th century. When people were full of God's Spirit and in alignment with the presence of God, St. Ignatius called that state consolation. And when people were stuck in grief, anger, denial, despair, he called that desolation. We are in desolation when we are in such pain that we can't imagine any other reality. We are in desolation when depression takes hold and we know we should get out of bed and get our bodies moving but we can't make ourselves do it. We are in desolation when we read the news and can't imagine any way out of the mess we are making of this world. We are in desolation when we can't trust that anyone would love us because our parents were abusive and we never learned what normal kindness and attachment could be like. We are in desolation when we take refuge in numbing ourselves with one too many glasses of wine or too much work or porn or Netflix.

When I was in training to become a spiritual director we had this wonderful teacher named Matt Linn, who was a Jesuit. One day he was modeling how to do spiritual direction with one of the students who was sharing a real situation with him in front of the class. She just kept talking about her pain and anxiety, and it was like she was a hamster in a wheel, just rehearsing the litany of her grief out loud over and over again, no matter what he said or did. Afterward, teaching us about the session, he said to all of us, “I knew I had to get her out of desolation if she was going to be able to see anything new or different.” Her pain and trauma had become totalitarian. They were the ocean she was swimming in, such that she couldn’t see signs of life or healing or the presence of God.

That was Mary Magdalene. She was there weeping in the garden and she wouldn’t leave. And, my friends, THAT is who Jesus chose to appear to first. The person who was stuck in grief.

At first, Mary can’t recognize Jesus. She can only interpret the world in front of her in terms of the story that is playing in her head. What opens Mary’s eyes is being called by name.

Jesus calls her to her true self. Earlier in John’s gospel Jesus had said, “I call my sheep by name and lead them out, and my sheep follow me because they know my voice.” Even though Mary’s eyes had been blinded by despair & grief, her body remembered what Jesus’ voice sounded like and she paradoxically knew him when he fully saw her and called her by name.

All this happened in a garden. Can you think of any other gardens in scripture? Do you remember a place called the Garden of Eden? That was the birthplace of scripture, the very first place God put humans, and it’s not an accident that John’s gospel puts Jesus’ encounter with Mary in a garden too. Because what happened to her is as significant and powerful and new as creation itself.

There is so much to say about what the resurrection of Jesus means for us in 21st century Minnesota, but it all begins with this. In our own power, we do not have eyes to see past the desolation of the world that we live in. We wish resurrection were more undisputable and in our faces, but even when it is, we usually don't have eyes to see it. What helps us begin to see the power of God in Christ is being called by name. It is God encountering us for who we actually are and not who we wish we were or who we pretend to be or who others see us to be.

Most of us think that the best we can do is to treat our losses with care, like Mary caring for the dead body of Jesus. But what God is actually about is re-creating and restoring the world. God is bringing about resurrection everywhere. There is a Tutsi woman named Denise Uwimana who was literally giving birth to a child when Hutus stormed into her home during the Rwandan genocide 25 years ago, and other Hutu neighbors rescued her and her child. She has just published a book called *From the Red Earth* in which she talks about the journey of resurrection she has been walking, the journey of healing for her nation she has been leading, since that time. There is a Korean man named Uk Bae-Lee who has just written a children's story book called *When Spring Comes to the DMZ*, about the accidental explosion of endangered species of flora and fauna in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. In this book Lee is teaching children that walls are not needed, that there is hope for a world in which all walls are torn down and people are able to live in peace. Pastor Alike Galloway from Liberty Church in North Minneapolis, who visited us on Maundy Thursday, has created and is expanding something called The Healing Space for victims of survival sex and sexual exploitation. This is a place intended to heal and break the unholy marriage of racism and generational poverty that keeps people traumatized and unable to break free. And, through the power of God in Christ, you and I can also see life we never thought possible.

We can become free to become truly curious about those we're close to and think we know so well, so that we can truly love one another into wholeness. We can become free enough to learn from our family members who have different political perspectives than we do. We can become free to forgive our enemies. It all begins with the reality that Jesus, who identified with oppressed and marginalized people through his crucifixion, did not lose who he was despite being brutalized and tortured and humiliated. God raised him from the dead, and he offers the possibility of repentance and healing and freedom both to victims everywhere and to those who are guilty of violence. To those who are stuck in desolation in their inner worlds and in the systems of desolation that destroy so much in this world.

Luckily Easter lasts 50 days in the Episcopal Church, so we will have a lot more to say about what resurrection means for us. It starts with being encountered for who you are as you actually are, with being called by name. Today we are going to baptize two beautiful boys, James and Peter, in which they will be marked as Christ's own forever. They will be called by name, and through baptism they will identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus – the fact that no power in the cosmos can eradicate who they were created to be in God, and that they are called to follow Jesus for the re-creation and restoration of this world. The same is true for each of us who is also called by name. Anna. Sherri. John. A.P. Dominic. Clara. Rohan. Ivy. Doug. Every one of us. You. Me.

Easter starts with God opening our eyes to see beyond the desolation within us and in the world around us. It starts with being encountered by a God who loves this world so much that God took human form, a God who will not be God without us. And for that, we say, Alleluia. Christ is risen.