

April 5, 2015

“New Beginnings”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



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.

What a joy to greet you on this glorious Easter morning in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And as has become our custom, I'd like to invite you to help me preach this sermon by joining me in the ancient greeting of the church on this day: Kids---you can do this, too! Christ is Risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED.

What a day to worship and give thanks to God. We do it with flowers and music and alleluias. We bring all of who we are to this time and place to give God thanks and praise. All of who we are. We bring our hopes and our dreams, our sorrows and disappointments. We bring our happy feelings and our sad feelings. We bring our convictions and our questions. We bring our deepest longings, and our weary souls and our wildest thoughts. Because, you know, if God can make this day happen, then just maybe everything IS possible.

Christ is Risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED.

Yes--God is making new beginnings—a future radiant with renewal, harmony, and peace—and invites us this morning to embrace the vision of that bright hope.

Surely there can be no greater joy than the joy of Mary Magdalene who went to the tomb early on that first Easter morning, while it was still dark only to find that the stone had been rolled away.

Mary Magdalene, with the other disciples, had been through the worst, the very worst of everything life can throw at you. They had enduring suffering, defeat, and betrayal. They had experienced first-hand the capacity of humans to grievously wound one another and the creation. They had stared into the face of death. Their hearts were broken, their spirits crushed. And yet...and yet...something more beckoned to them.

You see, the fact is that the most brutal suffering the world could impose, the most awful death, the most intense pain, could not thwart the force of life itself, the power of God to triumph over all the powers of darkness. "Christ's Resurrection is finally the most real thing there is or ever was or ever will be."

Christ is risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Something drew Mary Magdalene to the tomb that morning in the dark so that she might see the power of God. So that she might see for herself the power of God to create new beginnings. This is the beckoning promise of Easter that beckons us still. Life. Always, life. The stone rolled away again and again and again. The place of death emptied of its prize. Life restored in all its fullness and beauty and power. The mystery and truth and power of our faith is the bedrock of our hope.

Now, tombs then were different than what we see today, so let me say something about them so that we can really understand what the Scripture story is trying to convey. We read in Scripture that one of Jesus' wealthy followers, Joseph of Arimathea, gave what was to be his own tomb for Jesus' burial. These tombs were carved out from the solid rock, leaving a round opening of about 4'-6'. A round stone would be carved to roll into place to cover the opening. There was a groove carved out at the entrance, slightly sloped, and the round stone was rolled into the opening where it fell into place. Archeologists estimate that these round stones weighed somewhere between one and two tons. They could be rolled into place, but removing them would be nigh unto impossible. Yet, when Mary Magdalene got to the tomb early that first Easter morning, in the dark, the stone had been rolled away. The tomb

was empty. And so, you see, as Frederick Buechner puts it: "Resurrection means [that] the worst thing is never the last thing."

What the story is telling us is that this was no accident. This was no human feat. This could only have been an act of God, God surprising us all with the power and the audacity of that one act. God rolls away the stone, confounding, yes, the women and the other disciples lost in grief, confounding, too, the powers and principalities, confounding even death itself with this astonishing gift of life made new. God's power is greater! The stone is rolled away. All the stones are rolled away. The tomb is always empty.

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Herein lie the new beginnings offered to each and all of us this day. For do we not all encounter stones as we go through this life, huge, heavy, seemingly immovable stones, blocking the fullness of the life we seek?

To prepare for Easter this year, our congregation has been exploring the theme of Risking Forgiveness through the season of Lent, the season leading up and into this glorious day.

We've been doing hard spiritual work of moving stones, big stones in our hearts and minds that block us from forgiving---from forgiving others for hurts and wrongs, forgiving ourselves for mistakes, misdeeds, hurting others, forgiving God for all the really big stones of things too hard to bear, the things that happen in the course of this life that leave us questioning God's purpose, doubting God's power.

And we've been working to understand the depth and scope of the forgiveness Jesus himself offered, even from the cross, forgiveness that heals and sets us free. Forgiveness means that our misdeeds, our betrayals, our failures are not the last word.

God has the power to roll away all those stones, no matter how big, how heavy, how intractable. God has the power to roll away the stones. It is the power of love. God overwhelms us with love and makes new beginnings possible.

God's power, God's greatness is unsearchable, the Psalmist sang. And God has a thing about surprise and making new beginnings. We read it all through the Bible. Whether it was in the creation itself, or the rainbow covenant with all creation after the flood, or making a way for the Israelites through the Red Sea from slavery to freedom, or causing a savior to be born in Bethlehem when his people were enslaved again, a baby in whom we see God's fondest hope for us....God loves to make new beginnings.

Over and over God says: "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

And so, every Easter we do everything we can possibly think of to help ourselves really get it, to remind us that God is doing a new thing. Do you see it in the balloons out front and in the lilies? Do you hear it in the organ and the choir and the brass and tympani? Do you see it in the faces of the old and the children alike? Do you feel it in your beating heart? New beginnings in the transfigured light of this resurrection morning.

So that's the question for all of us on this glorious Easter day. Can we let ourselves believe that God has the power to roll away all the stones in our hearts? Can we roll away the stones of our own skepticism and cynicism to accept that in Christ Jesus we are totally forgiven and that we are given the power to forgive others, no matter who, no matter what? Can we dare to open our hearts so completely to God's love that even this day a brand new person might emerge within us? Can we claim for ourselves the new life God is making possible this day?

God has designs for a future for us and for this world, a future radiant with renewal, harmony, wholeness, and peace. Can we say YES to God's future, bright with hope? Can we say YES to God's new beginnings?

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Alleluia, alleluia. Amen.