

“Easter’s Truth”

John 20: 1- 18

Acts 10: 34- 43

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

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A minister shared the following email conversation sent to her by a good friend. The friend had a four-year-old daughter, Elena, and the conversation was about the struggle to get through to four-year-old Elena the meaning of Easter. It went something like this:

“Mommy, will the Easter bunny bring me purple jelly beans?”

“I am sure he will bring you jelly beans, Elena. But, remember, Easter isn’t about the bunny. It’s about Jesus.”

“But will they be purple?”

“Yes, honey, I am sure there will be some purple ones in there. Hone, the important thing about Easter isn’t the bunny. Easter is about how much Jesus loves you and me and the world.

“OK. Mommy, HOW MANY purple jelly beans will the Easter Bunny bring me?”

“Elena, I think he will probably bring plenty of purple jelly beans. Do you know how much Jesus loves you?”

Then there was a long pause. It seemed to be that four-year-old Elena was in deep reflection. Then, “Mommy?”

“Yes, Elena?”

“Will the Easter Bunny bring me chocolate eggs too?” (1)

For a four-year-old, Easter bunnies and purple jelly beans are much easier to understand than the Easter truth of resurrection. *And* dare I say, much easier to understand for children of any age, be they four or forty, nine or ninety or any age in between.

As we look around us, the Spring flowers, the new growth, the earth awakening from winter's darkness into new life – it's almost as if nature is crying out to us, "See?!" How can we deny this power of new life brought to us each Spring? And this year in particular: have you heard about the 'super bloom' happening in Southern California right now, at Carrizo Plain National Monument and other places in the area as well, places that if you go on the internet and look up a past image you will get a picture of a stark dessert, a 'Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days' desert, Like Ezekiel's valley of dry bones desert, rolling hills of dirt and rock and barrenness. But now? The desert is in full bloom! Wildflower seed that have lain dormant in this drought stricken area of Southern California now wet from rain and drought free have exploded into a profusion of color that people hadn't seen in 20 years! Just like those bones in Ezekiel's days, the desert is alive and dancing!

Spring certainly points us in Easter's direction, and for those of us without Spring allergies, gives us 'Alleluia' spirits! "Christ is risen, alleluia, Christ is risen indeed!" Mary goes to anoint a body, the tomb is empty, she tells others, then later as she grieves is met by the risen Christ!

Scientifically, intellectually, this story that our faith hinges on doesn't make too much sense. And it doesn't help that the gospel writers didn't get their stories straight. Someone asks, "Have you heard the Easter story?" And we who have read scripture answer, "Which one?"

Each author, years later, tried to sit down and put to words an event that held so much mystery and power and intimacy that it changed lives. In John's gospel, Mary's grief and despair turns to amazement and joy and she becomes the first messenger of this good news that 'she has seen the Lord'! For others it took some time, some convincing, fear and doubt held on to those first disciples just as it holds on to us. But then somehow faith is not only known in words but claimed by heart; that message of Easter - the manifestation of God's undefeated love, that nothing...not even our mess ups, not even our sins, not even our cynicism, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Today as we take up our Easter offering, some of which goes to Global Ministries, I thought I would share a story that came across my computer screen a couple of weeks ago. It's a story from Ann Gregory, one of our mission partners in Thailand. Although her work is primarily in communication, and coordinating visits with our partner organizations in Thailand, during the month of March she worked at a YMCA summer day camp for elementary school children, something outside of her comfort level. She writes, "This kind of work scares me to

death. Ask me to create a liturgy in a flash, or to drop everything and sing a solo, or teach a Bible study with almost no time to prepare, and I won't even blink.

Ask me to teach a roomful of 60 lively, bright, energetic 6-11 year-olds how to sing, to act, and to speak English, without sheer chaos, and I break out in a cold sweat. Well, maybe not cold....nothing is cold in Thailand this time of year."

One of the days she was working, a little seven-year-old boy came flying around the corner and into her arms. "Luckily", wrote Ann, "I was seated in a chair, that little seven year old bundle of joy didn't know how easy it would have been to knock sixty year old me to the floor!" She went on to add that being hugged by loveable kids is pretty fun, brings her joy and a sense of new life.

What she didn't notice right away was that the little boy, in his exuberance, broke her cross necklace, a necklace she had worn for twenty five years. But it wasn't a tragedy, she was able to fix it. And it provided her a parable of sorts for this Easter season. She writes,

"Later on, when I'd thought about it, I decided there was a parable here. The Cross is a sign of death, that Jesus turned into a sign of life. Christians have used it for almost 2,000 years as a subversive symbol, a way to show the world that we don't conquer through force or violence, but through love and self-giving. God's love doesn't usually tackle us, but today was an exception, and I'm grateful. I saw in it a resurrection parable, that, "Love broke the Cross."

"Love broke the Cross." Our faith statement and faith story, that Good Friday, a day of humanity at it's worst is not the end of our story, our faith story is that God is more, that God can take the worst we have and are and redeem it, even those times when all seems dead, even death itself.

We all have stories. We all walk around and act and react in large part because of these stories of our lives, how we grew up, what our families were like, things that happened. Some of our stories have chapters of regret, shame, pain. 'Oh, how we wish we had done that or not done that or said x or not said x.' The weight of that can be pretty damaging, can keep us from living life in it's fullness, living our days in gratitude.

On this Easter's Day, we remember and celebrate that our stories are a part of our larger faith story, that Love broke the cross, that whatever darkness the world has thrown at us or that we have created, God's love shines it out; Easter's truth! It's a

truth that doesn't sugar coat reality; does not deny evil or sin – the cross and the empty tomb go together – it is a faith truth that doesn't deny but says that evil and sin and darkness and death do not have the last word.

And we say, "But it's too good to be true!" Interesting that we don't have a saying, "It's too bad to be true." Apparently, we need less convincing when it comes to what is bad. We seem naturally to underestimate the power of the good.

Easter's truth is hard to believe. We want bodily proof, but it isn't a story to be proved it is a story to be lived. Sometimes we find ourselves in Mary's shoes. Mary at the beginning of the story. Mary who comes to the tomb thinking that death has won, sees no other end to the story; doesn't even recognize the Risen Christ in front of her, so caught up in her own pain and grief. Or maybe we're like the disciples, we've heard from someone, like they heard from Mary, that the tomb is empty, that something is going on, and so we've come to see for ourselves. We have followed others to church and looked into this whole faith thing and like them we just don't understand, we don't see the proof we expect. But here's a great thing to this Easter truth; the ones who come to the tomb don't get any proof. They just go back home and continue to hang out together until that ray of hope that is the Risen Christ appears on a dark night.

And as it appeared to them, it will and does appear to us. Surrounded by new life; in Spring's bloom, in a child's exuberant hug, in a congregation that finds new energy in ministry, in waking up after a time of grief and experiencing the sunshine of a new time, in the realization that the story you've been carrying is part of a larger story of a love that will never let you go.

Easter's truth; that love broke the Cross, but nothing can break that love!

Alleluia! Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed, I see him in your face!

(1) "Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans" by The Rev. Pam Driesell, PCUSA;
April 24, 2011