

April 1, 2018 Easter B Manor Road United Church Rev. Debra K. Schneider

John 20:1-18

The Triumph of Love

Sufi Mystic Rumi once wrote, "Spring is Christ, raising martyred plants from their shrouds." Celtic theologian, John Phillip Newell adds, "This Spring force is the Resurrection force deep in the body of the earth. It is deep also in each one of us, longing to come forth as surely as new life from the ground."

The florist was having an extraordinarily busy day. In the midst of it all, two deliveries were mistakenly interchanged. Later in the day a young man who had just started up a business in the area came in quite upset.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked holding up the arrangement. The florist looked up and read, "Rest in Peace." He apologized profusely, while barely containing his laughter.

Finally he said, "You should have seen the faces of the people at the funeral home when they received the flowers that said, "Good Luck in your new location!"

Sometimes we think of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus, and our minds go directly to thoughts about life after death... and what our future location might be!

This morning, however, I want to invite you to also think about the resurrection of Jesus as part of a promise, a pattern, and a way of life that enables us to live ever more confidently, more hopefully, and more lovingly! God's own power and energy inspired, empowered, and filled Jesus throughout his earthly life. It flowed in and through him—planting seeds of fresh possibility in the souls of those who opened to his holy wisdom.

When Jesus was crucified, the powers of death, for a brief moment, seemingly had their way with him. Then came accounts of resurrection appearances—to Mary in the garden, disciples in a locked room, and again around breakfast on the beach after a night of fishing; and then... the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We see an incredible transformation of Jesus' early disciples, now apostles (or sent ones), in the aftermath—new life springing up in the midst of them and spilling out into the world.

It seems that the same power that had been at work in Jesus' life is now set loose in the world—and it is accessible and available to everyone open to receive it!

Centuries before the time of Christ, the ancient poet Homer wrote: "Death is that thing that destroys what we call life and who can remove the terror of it?" I wonder what it would be like if we could lose our fear of death? What if the dark end of the tunnel that awaits every one of us ceased to be something that we dread? What if we were to look upon our death as a portal, the beginning of a new adventure? How would losing the fear of death impact the way we live?

Eugene O'Neill, great American playwright and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. In his play, O'Neill gives us a glimpse of the power of life without fear of death. The play begins, where the Biblical story of Lazarus leaves off presuming that the audience is familiar with the Biblical story. Lazarus has been dead and buried for four whole days when Jesus comes to the village of Bethany, commands the stone rolled back from the tomb, and raises Lazarus to life.

As the curtain goes up, Lazarus stumbles out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. After the grave clothes are taken off of him, Lazarus begins to laugh an embracing, astonishing, welcoming laugh. Lazarus embraces Jesus with gratitude; embraces his sisters Martha and Mary, and finally embraces the other astonished people gathered about. Lazarus has a very clear look in his eye. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches down and pats the earth. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbours as if he has never seen them before. He is overwhelmed by the incredible all rightness of the way everything is. His first words are, "Yes, yes, yes," embracing reality as it is being discovered all over again. The whole village is awash with wonder.

Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what is on everybody's mind. "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?"

Lazarus begins to laugh. Then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy."

In the Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri tells of the night of Good Friday in the year 1300 of Common Era. After a long and arduous journey through the horrors of hell and then up and on through purgatory, Dante finally draws near to the celestial sphere. As he draws near to Paradise itself, he hears a faint and distant sound. Cocking his head, straining his ears, Dante listens, then smiles, nods to himself and proclaims: it sounds "like the laughter of the universe."

Perhaps death is not the way it appears from this side of the veil. Perhaps death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos, but rather a portal through which we move into everlasting joy.

Easter Sunday is a time to laugh. It is a time to laugh at Death, a time to laugh at the powers of this world. Easter is the time to celebrate the sacred seed that has been planted within us that cannot be killed—the seed which insists on springing into new life, again and again!

On Easter Sunday we proclaim that God has planted a seed of life in us that cannot be killed.¹ Life and love win. No matter what happens, no matter what we are facing, my friends, death is dead. It is life that is eternal. And the heavens are ringing with laughter. Happy Easter.

¹pg. 111, *Home by Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Pub. 1999

Stories in the second portion of this sermon are drawn from a 2016 Easter sermon by The Rev. Dr. Nancy Taylor, Old South Church, Boston Mass found at Day1.org

Prayer

Gracious God, we celebrate the power of life and love at work in our world, in our church, and in our personal lives this Easter Sunday. Neither the death dealing, life-diminishing forces at work in our world, nor the tragic events that destroy human life and tear at our humanity will have the last word. For the power that raised Jesus from the dead, is the very power at work among us and in us to bring to completion the good work you began. Help us to tap into this healing, liberating power each day as we pray and serve and work to see your kin-dom realized and your will done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of risen Christ we pray. Amen.