

Surprised by Life

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I want to begin by inviting you go back in time with me to the year 2007 and to imagine an overgrown, vacant lot. Across the street is a house whose occupants sell drugs, a place that a year later would be the scene of a terrible murder. On this lot years before, there was an apartment complex owned by a slum landlord. The apartments had long since been condemned and demolished. All that was left was a ½ acre lot overgrown with weeds and covered with trash.

This lot was one block from the first congregation I served as pastor and one day back in 2007, I was walking through our neighborhood with a few church members, with our neighborhood association president, and with a few other community leaders. We didn't call it this, but it wasn't all that different than what we'll be doing later in the spring when we go through prayer walks together throughout our community as part of our strategic planning process. The point of a prayer walk is to simply pay attention, to be open to what God might want us to see, and on that particular walk through the neighborhood, apparently God wanted one person to see a garden.

Several people started to get excited. That community is a food desert and many people didn't have access to fresh vegetables. A garden would transform a lot that was a place of blight into a place of beauty.

So we cleaned off the lot. We found someone with a tractor to come and dig up the ground and we found buried in the dirt, slabs of concrete and brick and metal pipes left over from when the old apartment building had been demolished...enough to make several large piles of junk. Then we planted our garden...and nothing came up. The soil was too damaged. There were no nutrients. That land was barren.

I have a confession to make. I find Easter Sunday to be the hardest day of the year to figure out what to preach. The story of Jesus' resurrection is the most climatic story of our faith and it just feels like whatever I can say won't do the story justice. There always seems to be something lacking, and I think it's a question that goes something like this: "We have so many stories where God intervenes to help people. Jesus healed the sick. Lazarus was raised from the dead. Even Paul raised someone from the dead. And then every year, we hear this story about Jesus' resurrection and we want to know...God, why don't you do more intervening for us. Why don't you heal my spouse who has cancer. Why don't you heal my child who struggles with addiction. Why don't you raise my brother who died tragically? Why don't you do more of the things we read about you doing?"

Frustratingly, we don't get an answer to these questions or at least if there is one, I haven't found it yet. The stories of Jesus' resurrection do not answer all, or even many, of our questions. We don't know how Jesus was raised. We don't know who rolled the stone away. We don't know what Jesus did when he first came out of the tomb. We don't know why God raised Jesus but doesn't always pull us out of the bad things we experience.

And I think this frustration of not having the answers we want is especially present when we're going through something hard. When suffering comes, we have a lot of questions. "Why is this happening to me?" "Have I done something wrong?" "God, why won't you raise the dead? God, why won't you bring healing?" Those questions have become particularly pronounced these last two years when we've lived through this pandemic, experienced conflict and divisions for which it seems hard to find repair and healing, are witnessing the global rise of white supremacy and authoritarianism, and read reports about the horror of war, and we cry out, "God, why don't you make it all stop!"

I'm afraid, we don't always get an answer to these questions. We don't always get the answers that we want. But in the story of Easter, I think we get the answer we need. And I think the role of Mary Magdalene in our story can help us see a little bit of what that answer is. Earlier this week, we heard the story of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and death. We heard about how all of the male disciples fled, deserting Jesus in the moment he most needed them. But there was one person who remained loyal to him the whole time – Mary Magdalene. She was there when he was killed and our passage begins this morning with Mary going to the tomb. Peter and the other disciples were hiding, not daring to go to the tomb because if they were seen there, they might be arrested as one of Jesus' followers and suffer the same fate he did. But Mary was willing to risk everything to be loyal to Jesus, even after he had died.

And I think the first thing worth pointing out is that Mary was willing to practice hope, even when she felt no hope. She was willing to hope even when it seems all hope is lost. Now she may not have believed that there was hope, but she lived like there was – she went to the tomb and waited.

I wonder if we would know the hope of the resurrection if Mary hadn't been willing to hope against hope. In all of the gospels it is Mary and the other women who are willing to practice hope, who are willing to go to the tomb, when the male disciples are away in hiding. What would have happened if Mary and the other women had not lived as people of hope? Perhaps, the story of the cross would have been the end of the story because we would not have known the rest of the story – we would not have known that Jesus was raised from the dead.

When Mary saw the empty tomb, she ran to tell Peter and John and they came and saw the tomb just like Mary said. They go in and it even says that one of the disciples believed..... But he didn't believe enough to stay. Right after Peter and John saw the empty tomb, they left just as quickly as they had come, and once again Mary was alone at the tomb – the only one willing to risk being seen there; the only one still willing to hope against hope.

I've thought a lot about why Mary chose to stay but Peter and John left. Maybe Mary was so loyal, had such love for Jesus, that she simply couldn't leave. But I also wonder if there was something deep within her that allowed her to see something that others couldn't see, that allowed her to see life when others could only see death.

I need our kids to help me for a moment. Can all the kids come forward.

This is a bucket of compost...do you want to touch it?

What's it feel like?

Do you know what this is?

It's actually a bunch of dead stuff.

You see, all this stuff is made when dead leaves and plants get pile up and over time, bacteria – living things so tiny you can't even see them – start eating all that dead stuff and when they do it turns it into compost and compost really is what makes dirt, dirt. You see, all this dead stuff becomes a part of the dirt and all the nutrients and vitamins that were a part of the leaf or a part of the plant, go back into the dirt and guess what, it becomes food for new seeds and new plants. From dead stuff like this compost, new life – like these beautiful flowers we have in church today -- happens.

Thanks for helping me out. You can go back to your seat now.

Compost, of all things, has helped me understand Mary and the story of our resurrection a little better. You see, back in 2007 I was ready to give up on our garden, but there was someone in that community – the neighborhood president Keith – who was a lot like Mary and he kept hoping that a garden could still grow. Even when all the evidence suggested the garden was a failure he kept hoping. One day he called me and introduced me Myron Pierre, a neighborhood artist who loved the creative aspects of gardening. Myron, in particular loved dirt so much so that he nicknamed himself "Soil Man." Myron looked at that ugly, vacant lot and he was able to see what I could not. Myron took that pile of junk that we had dug up around the fence and together with some youth from the neighborhood arranged it in a decorative border...turning something ugly into a work of art. He then started to do his thing...he took all of those weeds and put them in a pile. He mixed in rotting produce that he picked up from grocery stores and used coffee grounds and every day, he would turn those piles with a pitch fork. One day, he told me to stick a long metal stick into the middle of the pile and then to see how hot the stick was. He told me it's cooking. By next season, it'll be ready, he said.

Myron took a whole bunch of dead stuff and turned it into compost, and that compost was then added into the dirt, and before long, the soil was resurrected. It had come alive and was no longer a red clay but a rich, black dirt. If you were to go visit that garden today, you would see not only one lot but now five lots that have been transformed from vacant, ugly, dead spaces...to vibrant, bountiful, beautiful, and full of life....all because a few people were able to imagine life where I could only see death.

I wonder if that's what Mary was able to do as she continued to wait by the empty tomb...she stubbornly refused to believe that death was the end of the story. But hoping in this way is not always easy or that it doesn't come with a lot of doubts and even despair.

And soon, it becomes too much for her and she begins to weep. She cries and cries and cries, but she stays by the tomb. And it was in that moment, her most desperate moment, that Jesus comes to her and calls her by name. The story of the resurrection teaches us that in the most hopeless moment, Jesus comes to us and calls us by name. In the most unexpected moment, life bursts through and we find the answer we've been seeking all along.

As I said, the stories of Jesus' resurrection do not answer all of our questions. We don't know everything that we want to know. We don't know why God doesn't act in the same way when we most want, most need God to act and raise the dead, bring healing, end suffering. But what we do know is that in the most hopeless moment – when Mary has been left all alone at the tomb, Jesus comes to her and she knows finally that everything is going to be ok.

Friends the hope of Easter is not that bad things won't come our way. The hope of Easter is that when bad things do come our way, Jesus comes our way too. The hope of Easter is that no matter how desolate the land may appear, no matter how much bad news we see all around us, life and hope and love have this way of surprising us over and over again so that which we thought was dead is alive, that which we had given up on suddenly offers new hope, and in our darkest moments, we find that we are held by a love that is beyond our ability to comprehend.

And in that moment, the moment that Jesus met Mary in her pain and her grief, he then does this incredible thing. He says to Mary that he is going to “my father and your father, to my God and to your God.” Do you see that? Jesus, the risen one, is making common cause with Mary. He is saying that my God, the God who raised me from the dead, is also your God. Jesus is naming Mary as his sister. God is her parent too. And in the same way, Jesus is naming each of us as his family...as brother, as sister, as sibling.

Friends, this is why we dare to hope against hope. This is why we dare to believe that everything will be ok when it seems like nothing is ok. Because the same God that raised Jesus from the dead is our God. The same Jesus who came to Mary, who claimed her as sister, comes to us in our moments of need and claims us as family, claims us as beloved. And the same God who called Jesus forth out of a tomb has this amazing way of surprising us with life over and over again whether it's in the midst of a global pandemic or the sprouting of a garden, or the places in our own lives that we thought were barren and broken only to discover that hope stubbornly persists.

So, hear the good news of Easter:

Jesus is risen.

Love wins.

And new life is all around us.