

*Sermon I Have Seen the Lord! Easter Sunday April 5, 2015*

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put Him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying. Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put Him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. He said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking Jesus was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him and I will get Him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*). Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to Me, for I haven't yet gone up to My Father. Go to My brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what He said to her. John 20: 1-18

I just watched the movie *Shakespeare in Love*. It's been a long time since I'd seen it and I realized that my idea of what's romantic has changed over the years. At first I watched it with a skeptical eye thinking to myself that people don't really die for love (forgetting that the young Shakespeare who is so desperately in love in the movie with the Lady Viola wrote the tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet.) *Shakespeare in Love* is also a tragic love story but whose characters manage to stay alive and afloat with hope. It's kind of an Easter story. Repeated several times in the movie is a refrain, like a mantra, "It's a mystery." Sometimes the refrain is prefaced with the words, "I don't know." As in, "I don't know... It's a mystery."

Today is Easter, a distinctly Christian holiday but also observed by the ham, and the hard-boiled egg, and chocolate bunny industries. Much of the Christian year - most any other Sunday - God's scandalous, outrageous love for humanity can be soft-pedaled into a message more palatable to post-modern ears and post-miracle hearers. But Easter calls for us to crack open the shell of "enlightened" disbelief and enter into a mystery.

Long, long ago God (who if you've read the Hebrew Scriptures had been trying for pretty much eternity to get humanity's attention, and love, and faithfulness) - God decided that everything God had done up that point to be in an intimate covenant relationship (covenant being a binding, legal, sacred agreement) with humanity hadn't worked, and so became one of us.

At Christmas we celebrate Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. God came, not as a god but as a tiny, vulnerable, human baby, to be with us, to be one of us, in the person of Jesus. Jesus' life and His ministry personally delivered the messages God had been sending through the prophets. All the things we'd valued as the best ways to live, Jesus said, were not only at odds with God's values but brought death and destruction with them.

Reading the newspaper last week, which was Holy Week, when the church remembers - we hold that week as timelessly holy and horrific - the events leading up to Jesus' arrest, torture, and death on a cross, it was clear that the "best ways" we know to live - from Kenya to Indiana... war, hatred, intolerance, inflexibility, bullying, fear and greed - all bring with them not the best ways to live but sorrow, and death, and destruction. We've tried these "best ways" to live for millennia. It's not worked out well

for us so far. Jesus taught us that God has another way. God's best ways to live are: Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. Is it possible for us to be successful, and come out ahead, and subdue our enemies, and live the good life, with only God's best ways to live? I don't know. It's a mystery. Because we haven't tried it yet.

Last Sunday was Palm Sunday, when we processed from the Plaza up on Mt. Diablo Blvd. to the church, following Jesus and a donkey, waving palm branches, and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of God! Welcome, King Jesus! We love you!" For a few moments in time, as traffic went by and people stared at us, we *were* the crowds who welcomed Jesus as He rode a donkey into Jerusalem. Then during worship we told about the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion: when one of His disciples betrayed Him for money; when all His friends ran away and left Him alone because they were afraid; when Jesus stayed silent before His accusers; when the soldiers spat on Him and mocked and beat Him; when the religious authorities, who'd had it "up to here" with that turn-the-other-cheek-love-trumps-the-law nonsense Jesus was teaching whipped that same crowd into a frenzy who called for Jesus' blood. And for *that* moment in time we became *that* crowd who shouted "Crucify Him!" because we too had had it "up to here" with all that love-your-enemies-pray-for-those-who-persecute-you jibber-jabber from Jesus. The lights in the sanctuary got dimmer and dimmer as we told the story of Jesus' agony; nailed to a cross, sobbing with intolerable pain, "My God, My God, why have [even] You abandoned Me?" Don Keeble and the Choir sang a heartbreaking song called *Cross Cry* taken from Jesus' words on the cross: "Take care of my mother." We left the sanctuary in silence. And it seemed in that moment that everything the news

reports *is* true: hell and death and destruction always have the last word. How was it remotely possible for God to redeem the cross? We didn't know then. We didn't know last Sunday what God would do today... It was still a mystery.

I'm retelling some of last Sunday's worship because if you weren't here... or you didn't worship somewhere... you didn't have the opportunity to walk through Jesus' last days with Him, and to experience the finality of the cross. Last Sunday we heard that God gave everything for us, out of love for us, and we nailed God to a cross and put God in a tomb to keep God's outrageous, intolerable, inclusive, redemptive love quiet. Then on Holy Saturday, all the world was quiet. The Apostles Creed, which is one of the universal statements of Christian belief, was created by the fathers and mothers of the early church, sometime between the 1st and 3rd centuries. (It's on page 881 of the United Methodist hymnal.) It affirms that "Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead." On Holy Saturday when all the world was silent God must have sat in silence too. Jesus was dead. Humanity had used all of our "best ways" to silence God's love. I think God must have wept for us that day. I think God must have cried all day.

John's gospel tells us that on the first day of the week - on that first Easter morning - while it was still dark (and John uses darkness to describe both nighttime and spiritual darkness) Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away. The male disciples came and saw the empty tomb and went away. Mary stayed. And then God revealed God's trump card... God's great "Yes!" - the Risen Christ - in response to humanity's "No!" I think we see a flash of God's sense of humor here, that the first person to see God's improbable, unbelievable response - that is, Jesus

Christ risen from the dead - to humanity's hatred and fear was a woman, who in that moment in history had no power, no voice, no independence, and no inherent value aside from keeping house and bearing heirs. Who would believe such a story? Who would believe such a woman?

Today I wonder - in this moment in history - who still hears and believes such a story, that God's love is so unstoppable that not even all the powers of hell and death can silence it? God is mystery and this ancient, improbable, unbelievable story of how God raised Jesus from the dead is pure mystery. I've known it all of my life. I know this story like I know the color of my eyes or the shape of my fingers and I've never questioned its authenticity or its power. But what words do I use, what language do I speak, that conveys the deathless love of God? I don't always know how to speak about the mystery of God's unstoppable love.

I'd forgotten a lot of the movie *Shakespeare in Love*. I laughed and cried as if I'd never seen it before: this passionate love story of the author of *Romeo and Juliet*, of the young couple who died for love. I think it was a "God-thing" that I watched *Shakespeare in Love* during Holy Week. It reminded me that sometimes people die for love. On the cross, Jesus died for love of us.

On that first dark Easter morning Mary stood outside the tomb, seeking Jesus. He was not in the tomb, but standing next to her, and He spoke her name. And here's the take-away from this gospel story. There are tombs in life; some of them are outside us and some are inside us. Jesus has been in the tomb, and it was murderous hatred and fear that hung Him on the cross to die. So when you're in the tomb remember that Jesus has been there. And call on Him. Call on Him, cry out, like Mary did, who stood in

the dark garden weeping for her Lord. Jesus called Mary by name and that's when she recognized Him. Jesus knows your name too. I know it sounds preposterous, unbelievable... like the whole Easter story... but God knows your name. God loves you preposterously, unbelievably, eternally. I don't know why. It's a mystery.

On Easter we celebrate that Jesus has risen from the dead and God's Kingdom (the Kingdom we pray will come on earth as it is in heaven) has begun. It's already here. (I know it doesn't seem like it. I was at Safeway yesterday afternoon to buy some Peep's and it was crowded and people were acting really awful. You wouldn't have known yesterday in Safeway that Easter means that God's Kingdom is already here.) I had a tiny, very brief thought that I might shout into the crowd, "People, the world has changed! Easter happened! Love has the last word!" (It was a very tiny, brief thought.)

I think where you'll know that Easter has happened and God's Kingdom has begun is here, at church. There are many reasons people don't come to church. The church can't compete with sports and homework and hangovers and Sunday-morning French toast. But I'd like to give you a reason to be part of the church. Because here, every week, unlike almost any other place you can go, we remember and give thanks that Easter happened. Here we remember and give thanks that God has the last word. Even on the cross. Even in the grave. God has the last word: love. Love stronger than hate. Love stronger than fear. Love stronger than intolerance. Love stronger than inflexibility. Love stronger than bullying. Love stronger than greed. Love that overpowers sin and hell and death. Love is why we believe this story of the first Easter. Easter - that is, God's love that has given everything for us - can help us, and heal us, if we allow ourselves to lean into the mystery of God.

Every Sunday we spend a few moments in silence, sitting with God. This morning, this beautiful Easter morning, in the coming silence, friends... lean a little closer to God. Lean towards love. I don't know why God loves us with everything God is. I don't know why God died for love of us. I can't explain God's love. It's a mystery. I can only tell you what's true in my heart and in my life: that God continues to call me out of the tombs of sin and self-absorption, the tombs of the "best ways" I know how to live, to learn God's best ways: Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. God is teaching me to love, and God's love is changing me. This is my witness.

And this is the hope and the promise of Easter: that the God who came to be one of us, who died for love of us, will live within us if we let Him. God will teach us God's ways. God will change us with God's love. This is the hope of the world. Amen.