

Sermon Easter Sunday 2017

After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. The angel rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed and the garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move. The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as He said. Come and look at the place where He was placed. Now, get on your way quickly and tell His disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Him there.' That's the message." The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" He said. They fell to their knees, embraced His feet, and worshiped Him. Matthew 28:1-9

Today marks the end of the season of Lent, which is the 40 days leading up to Easter that reflect and echo the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, where He fasted and prayed and was tempted by the devil. During Lent we Christians try to live more intentionally, fasting from things that tempt us away from the care of our souls and experiencing the love Jesus has for us; we try to be more mindful of the wilderness within all of us; and we try to take to heart what Jesus said are the two most important ways to live: that we love God with all our passion and prayer and intelligence, and we love other people the ways we love ourselves. This Lent we've kept company with the Prophet Amos from the Hebrew Scriptures. Amos was written about 750 BCE (before the Common Age.) In the Old Testament the prophets spoke for God, often of God's disappointment and anger in the ways the people neglected God and forgot to care for others. (The two things Jesus said are the most important things.) Amos spoke harsh words to the Israelites, who at that time in history were prosperous, but cruel, having forgotten that they'd once been slaves in Egypt. and had been exiled from their own

land, and now could think only of themselves, with no regard or compassion for the poor and the powerless. Amos told them that their religiosity - their festivals and burnt offerings given to the Lord - didn't amount to "diddly-squat" (I am paraphrasing Amos) to the Lord, because the kind of religion God wanted was religion intertwined with justice and righteousness (care and compassion) for all people.

In his work for American civil rights, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted the prophet Amos, who spoke for God: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!"

At the beginning of Lent our Worship Team created a wall in the back of the sanctuary to look like rocks, and every week we've written on strips of paper some aspect of justice and righteousness to symbolize them flowing down over the rocks. The first week of Lent we each wrote our name on the papers because unless we know that we are made in God's image, and that in the waters of baptism we have been claimed as God's own, as God's beloved, there's little chance that we can see all others as also God's own, as God's beloved, and care about them. The second week of Lent we wrote words on the papers of anger and disappointment (believing that God is also angry and disappointed) over the injustice in the world. The third week of Lent we wrote what our dreams are for the church (believing that God also has dreams for us.) The next week of Lent we were given strips of paper that already had words on them; words Jesus to explain His purpose. We believe that this is also our purpose and that it fulfills God's desire for religious faith to intersect where justice flows down and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We Christians are to preach good news; proclaim release to the

captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty the prisoner; to heal the sick, and feed the hungry, and eat with sinners.

Preaching on Easter Sunday is kind of odd. Some of us have walked through every Sunday of Lent together, and some of us were last here on Christmas Eve. Some of us are here because our mother is the pastor, and some of us are here for the music. And some of us are here because there is chocolate to be had in-between the two hours of worship. This is more-than-usual diversity in the congregation, and creating a sermon to speak to you (to touch your heart, or bring you closer to Jesus) is a challenge.

I made the Easter banners (with the help of Vistaprint) that say “Easter is for everyone. No religious experience needed.” It was going to say, “No faith experience needed” but I realized that everyone has faith. We all believe... in something.

The 18th century French gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, said, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are." The 19th century Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, said, “Tell me the landscape in which you live and I will tell you who you are.” To paraphrase both of them... “Tell me your story... and I’ll tell you what you believe.”

Before people (other than scholars and priests) could read, the stories of our faith were painted on the walls of chapels and cathedrals, and made in stained glass. The windows in our sanctuary tell some of the stories of our faith: one of them is the Good Samaritan, a story Jesus told about three different religious people who walked down the street and seeing a man beaten and bleeding, crossed the street in order to not have to touch him or deal with him. A Samaritan (the race who were at odds with Jews,

the people who were listening to Jesus) saw the man and bandaged his wounds and took him to an inn where he could be looked after. This story is meant to teach us that we are all neighbors, and no one is worthless, and no one is holier than another. Another window is of a Samaritan woman talking with Jesus at the well where she went to get water. This woman was, as is often true of the people Jesus connected with, an outsider. This woman had a dubious past, and was shunned by her neighbors for the choices she'd made. Jesus, a male, a Jew, connected with this Samaritan, a woman. Unheard of. Except in God's Kingdom where all people belong to God... all are loved, and worthy of kindness and dignity and human rights. Another window is the prodigal son, and in this story we are meant to see that we are the prodigal child... restless, ungrateful, arrogantly independent from God, and full of ourselves; and God is the parent who welcomes us home, no reservations, no questions asked, beyond grateful to hold us next to his heart again. Another story-window is of Jesus surrounded by children. His disciples had shooed the children and their mothers away from Jesus because Jesus was a man, a busy and important and holy teacher, and the women and children were... not any of those things. In this picture we are meant to see that God values all human beings, and that age and ability and difference are unimportant to God.

You might wonder why I'm explaining the story-windows to you on this Easter Sunday, this day full of alleluias, and flowers and trumpets and chocolate and triumph! I think if we have a common story about Jesus Christ, who was and is the walking picture-window of God's passionate and unconditional love for us, we can interpret tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, and every day that's not full of

flowers and trumpets and chocolate and alleluias. This is a wonderful day: the day when Jesus rose from the dead and showed God's triumph over sin and death and hell. The day when hatred had to admit defeat, because, in fact, Jesus came as a living picture-window of God's love, and humanity couldn't stand it, and we crucified Him to make Him shut up. Jesus was silent, in the grave, for three days. And this is where we pick up the story we heard at the beginning of worship, after three days of the silence of the tomb. "The angel spoke to the women: 'There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as He said. Come and look at the place where He was placed. Now, get on your way quickly and tell His disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Him there.' That's the message.' The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. 'Good morning!' He said. They fell to their knees, embraced His feet, and worshiped Him."

In this story, layered with meaning like all gospel stories, we are meant to see that God will not allow anything to come between God and humanity. Not even death... and not just physical death but all kinds of death like despair and depression and hopelessness and homelessness and poverty and powerlessness and any kind of hatred and rejection that can be leveled at us. This is what the picture-window of God's love for us looks like: it's an anxious parent who holds her wayward child next to her heart, and sobs in relief that she can hold him again. It's Creator of the heavens and the earth, who also values the tiniest child; society's most vulnerable and least powerful and important person. It's the nonjudgmental Savior who sits patiently at the side of the well

with an outcast, listening to her and offering her the gift of His presence. And it's eternal love that reaches out for you and me, that will not and cannot be silenced by hatred, ignorance, sin, or even the grave.

Each one of us has a story about who we are. In some families the story is that we are loved and valued, and in some families the story is that we aren't important and cared for. The story of Jesus is picture-window after picture-window of God reassuring us that we are of infinite value and loved beyond our wildest imagining. We choose the story we want to make our own. I think this is why we come to church: because we want to hear the story that we don't really hear anywhere else: that nothing can stop God from loving us, and nothing can separate us from God's love; that God's purpose for us is to care for the lost and the least; and that how we respond to God's amazing love is to (wherever and however we can) make justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I'd like to ask you to ask Jesus Christ to be in your story. Whether you've done this before or not, I invite you to ask Him to rewrite your story, to be your friend and Savior, to walk with you on the days full of Easter alleluias and flowers and trumpets and chocolate, and to be with you on the days that are as silent and sad as the tomb. Please pray this with me (silently or aloud... whatever you feel.) Jesus, please make Your story my story. I acknowledge the sin, and hatred, and injustice in my own heart. I humbly ask You to forgive me. I'm ready for You to use me to help bring heaven to earth. Thank You for loving me... so extravagantly... so amazingly. Thank You, Jesus. Amen.

Please join me at the bottom of page 4 on your worship program, where it says "Praying Our Joys and Sorrows." During this season we have been letting go of things that prevent us from working towards God's justice for all people. We've closed our fists tightly and then opened them slowly to allow the Spirit's cool refreshing water to flow through us. Today we do not clench our fists for this is a day we celebrate that all anger and hatred can be overcome when we live as Easter People, in love and service. And so, I'm going to ask you to simply open your hands on your laps as we pray today as a sign of our openness to a new day for our lives.

Pastor: We come before you, Resurrected Jesus,
with open hands.

Some of us may know what we are called to be and do
on behalf of love in this world. Some of us are still searching.

Guide us, Jesus.

Open us to Your possibilities.

Open all our senses and help us be on the lookout for ways
to improve someone's life even just for a minute.

Help us to know that any act,
no matter how small or grand a gesture,
is one step closer to bringing Your Kingdom closer,
to bringing Your will on earth as it is in heaven.

Help us to be Your unconditional love in the world,
moving closer to compassion and courage
to speak up and stand up for what is right and good.

Everyone: Jesus, may Your peace flow upon us.

In our lives, and in the world,

may justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!

Pastor: We lift up prayers for people whose names we know,
whose circumstances are close at hand.

We lift up other names aloud or in the silence of our hearts
of those in the church, of friends and family, of community members...

We lift up prayers for people whose names we do not know
but for whom our hearts break, and in the coming silence we open ourselves to pray for
all of creation, for the things left unnamed, the hurts of which we are unaware and for
the deepest yearning of our hearts...

Everyone: Jesus, may Your peace flow upon us.

In our lives, and in the world,

may justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!

A Moment of Silence

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead

us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.