

Easter Day 2021

John 20:1-18

Jesus is alive.  
The stone is rolled away  
and the tomb is empty.

Jesus is alive  
And among us  
As truly as he was alive with Mary  
In the garden –  
The garden of discovery,  
Of renewal,  
The garden of hope,  
And courage,  
And return to life.

This is the truth  
In which we live.  
But what does it mean  
To proclaim the truth of the resurrection  
In a world where we are battered by the facts?

Yes, we are battered by these facts:  
the stubborn pandemic  
And the resurgence of gun violence  
And the relentless heavy toll of racism  
And the very real tragedies  
And disappointments  
And inconveniences of our own lives now.

And in the midst of all this,  
Particularly poignant on this day,  
There are these facts,  
Facts from which we have tried to hide,  
But can no longer deny.

These facts:  
Not only attendance at worship,  
But religious affiliation,  
Are no longer rolling down a slow and gentle incline;  
They have fallen off the cliff.

Fewer than half of the people of this country  
Claim that they belong to any religion

Or way of faith –  
And among the young,  
It's even fewer.

Now of course,  
There are good, honorable,  
And ethical people  
In every generation  
Who claim no allegiance to a way of faith.  
But for many of us,  
Maybe even most of us,  
Belonging to a faith community,  
The formation and accountability  
And commitment,  
Help to make us better than we are.  
We need a way of faith  
To keep us honest,  
And hopeful, and generous.  
And for most of us,  
That allegiance is fading fast.

And, in the empty space  
Where loyalty to a faith,  
Or religious practice,  
Or covenanted community used to be,  
Too many people,  
Who need to put their love and loyalty somewhere,  
Who feel the empty space inside  
That so many have called  
“the God-shaped hole,”  
Have given their hearts away  
To fervent political partisanship,  
Entrenched partisanship of every stripe.  
Or they cling to crazy conspiracy theories.  
And you don't need me to tell you  
What that looks like,  
And sounds like,  
And feels like as it happens all around us,  
And maybe, sometimes,  
Within us.

We need, most of us,  
To give our hearts away.  
Not only to the individuals we love  
And the causes we support,  
And the passions that energize us,

But to something we understand  
To be of ultimate worth.

And if church or synagogue or mosque  
Or temple or stupa or forest grove  
No longer offer us a place  
Where we can, in community,  
Find meaning, and freedom, and peace,  
Welcome, acceptance, and vindication,  
Then we will look elsewhere.  
Politics will become,  
As so many talking heads have said,  
Our pseudo-religion.

And we will walk away from the story of the empty tomb.

The story we tell this morning  
Is precious, and beautiful,  
And it will endure forever.

But it isn't very popular anymore.

And still, I invite you, this morning,  
To give your heart back to this story,  
And take the story back into your heart.

And then,  
Because the times demand it,  
I would invite you to embrace this work,  
This challenging and ultimately rewarding work:  
Find the story living in the events of your own life,  
And in the lives of those around you,  
And maybe even in the life of the world,  
And tell the story in new ways,  
So that it might have a chance  
Of entering the God-shaped hole  
That is draining away the life of the world.

There is a story beyond the story,  
A story where the moment in the garden  
Flowers into fullness  
In your life  
And the lives of those around you.  
And that's where your work,  
My work  
Our work together,

Begins.

Mary Magdalene knew about that story beyond the story.  
She ran to tell the disciples,  
I have seen the Lord.  
And so she became  
The apostle to the apostles,  
The first to tell the story in her own words.

I have seen the Lord.  
We have seen the Lord.

That's the story we can tell  
In a world  
That sees nothing to value  
In the old words and tired customs  
That, apparently,  
Are what we show to those who care to look.

But we're not about old words and tired customs.  
We're about a world turned upside down,  
And life springing up and away from the jaws of death,  
And love let loose upon the world.

There are stories of new life all around us,  
Even in the midst of pandemic  
And gun violence and seemingly intractable racism.

If we are a people who trust the truth  
That we hear in the story of Jesus and Mary in the garden,  
Then we can be,  
In fact, given the times,  
Must be,  
A people who can tell our own stories  
Of love that is stronger than death.

Some among us can tell stories  
Of recovery from addiction,  
Of being freed from slavery  
To something that kills us  
And living an entirely new life.

Some among us can tell stories  
Of living again after bitter loss,  
Of the courage to put one foot in front of the other  
Until the darkness gives way

To light –  
At least enough light to see into the day to come.

Some among us can tell stories of facing questions,  
Questions so hard and bitter  
That they make us want to give up and go away.  
And yet we stay,  
Stay with the question,  
Letting go of the need for an answer.

What is your story?  
How do you know that what happened  
In the garden of the resurrection,  
So long ago and so far away –  
This very morning,  
In this very place –  
How do you know that this story is true?

When you find your answer,  
Or a hint of a glimpse of an answer,  
Then you know your task.  
The world is hungry  
For these real life,  
Here and now stories  
Of how you know the resurrection is true.

I have heard these stories from you.  
They tell me that the story  
Of Jesus and Mary in the garden is true.  
Your stories sustain and inspire me.  
They invite me to look into my own life.  
And there I find the same message  
That you have found,  
The message that Mary went running from the garden  
To tell to the disciples  
And then to the world –  
I have seen the Lord.  
He is alive, now and forever.  
Love has the last word.  
Death is real,  
And it is not the end.  
The beginning, and the end,  
Over and above all things,  
Is love.

Only love can fill the God-shaped hole.

The story of love is ours to tell now.

And when we tell it,

It is true.

Jesus is alive;

Jesus is here, now, always.