

Welcome dear friends on a chilly soon to be sunny morning; the dawn is just over the horizon behind me and I am in my front yard, or more appropriately a "wannabe front yard" as I live on the side of a hill in the foothills of Shasta Lake. Here over the past 3 years I have attempted to plant what is familiar to me, lavender and lantana, day lilies and daffodils, geraniums and begonias... I can come out here in the morning or evening and sit and listen to the doves cooing, the hummingbirds buzzing, and an occasional dog reminding me they are still nearby. I can see black and blue butterflies darting around and I am reminded that I am only a small creature in a vast world, only a limited being in a universe which dates back to only God knows when for sure. Here in the midst of beauty, I find hope. I learned this from my parents who were avid gardeners. My garden gives me a calming perspective when life feels out of control, when the dark times in my life have become overwhelming and I am brought to my knees in sadness. Over the past few weeks, I find that those dark times have increased and I am on the verge of tears way more than usual. My garden meets me with an awareness of huge grief. I watch the news, I see the pictures, I hear the stories, I choke with emotion. So many people sick, so many people dying. No matter what people say, there is nothing normal about what we are living in right now, and the tears well up inside. I bring my tears, disappointment, and grief to my garden, pouring out my heart, explaining all the ways it shouldn't have to be like this.

A Disciples pastor and colleague Doug Skinner put into words on Facebook what I feel: I cry for the people who are dying alone and for the families who can't be with them. I cry for the doctors and nurses who are so brave and so scared and so tired, and even now don reddened marks on their faces where masks have dug in deeply to their skin as they try to protect themselves and families.

I cry for the people who do all the hidden jobs for minimum wage that keep hospitals going day and night – the people who cook, and who carry, and who clean, and who clerk.

I cry for the government leaders who are doing everything they possibly can to make things better, and for the leaders who seem, for whatever reason, to make things even more difficult.

I cry for the shepherds who can't get to their flocks, and for the flocks who need their shepherds.

I cry for those facing milestones in their lives: weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and yes even funerals that cannot be honored with hugs and handshakes, kisses and embraces. I cry for the nation I believed we were, and for the nation we've turned out to be; for the unfathomable reality that the richest country now has 1/3 of the world's cases of COVID and the most number of deaths.

And if you aren't crying in one way or another, then I would direct you to the counsel of the 6th century Syrian Saint, Jacob of Saroug who says, "You have no tears? Buy tears from the poor. You have no sadness? Call the poor person to moan with you. If your heart is hard, and has neither sadness nor tears, with alms, invite the needy to weep with you...provide yourself with the water of tears, and may the poor come to help you put out the fire in which you are perishing."

Without the tears, we cannot possibly come to embrace and understand the magnitude of this day and the story we are about to hear. Now is the time for tears.

“Were You There” Trio - Pegasus

Scripture Reading – John 19: 41 – 20:16

Mary comes to the garden tomb, clinging to the familiar traditions she knows so well – to take care of the body of Jesus since there had been no time to do so on the Jewish Day of Preparation when such tasks would have been forbidden. The body needed to have burial myrrh and other oils placed upon it as a sign of committal and blessing. No doubt her eyes are wet with tears as she approaches the tomb, then she sees the stone rolled away. The shock must have been intense; the disbelief must have been overwhelming. We know what that is like – how can this be? Life isn’t supposed to happen like this. Our General Minister & President, Teresa Hord Owens, calls it a major disruption, an event so disruptive that it literally changes the entire world. Bodies don’t get taken from tombs and viruses don’t consume entire populations bringing them to their knees. People don’t spend Easter morning huddled in their homes isolated from one another and medical professionals don’t lose their lives for doing what is good and honorable. Restaurants and small businesses don’t shut down overnight laying off millions of workers and neighbors don’t suddenly become frightened to engage with one another. In our text, Mary wonders who could do such a cruel thing? It had already been rumored that the body might be stolen so in Matthew’s text, Roman guards are stationed to prevent such a theft. Where has the regard for humanity gone, that leaders would choose their own profit and power prompting lies about possibly stealing a body from a tomb... or dare I say, prompting defiance against sheltering in place and listening to the wisdom of medical experts? When did holding onto one’s power become so important as to justify the endangerment of human life? Angels speak to Mary in the garden, “Why are you crying?” The unthinkable has happened, she explains, someone has defiled her beloved’s body and removed it from its final resting place. What kind of people do such a thing? What happened to common decency and respect? Mary turns from the angel to the supposed gardener standing behind her. Maybe he has the answer, maybe he saw something, maybe he did it. “Sir,” she says, “if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him.” Mary tries to appeal to the Gardener’s better nature. “Don’t keep me from the one I love; now more than ever before, I need to be able to touch him, to care for him, to not abandon him.” Oh, that must be the same feeling those loved ones experience as they must keep their distance from COVID-infected family members. They know the reality, the danger, but that doesn’t stop the pleading, the rationalizing, the begging for a chance, just one more chance, to touch and be touched. “Don’t keep me from the one I love...” (sigh, look at garden)

The Gardener Jesus, says to her “Mary!” By his voice, she recognizes who it is, it is the one she loves and she responds, Rabboni, when means Teacher. What power and wealth, even medicine, could not bring about, God does. In that garden, near that tomb of despair, God creates a miracle. And things will never be the same again. The world shifted on its axis at that moment; life as it had been known up to that time was suddenly altered. Death had lost its sting. Where O death is your victory now?

Never before has Easter day held such meaning for our generation. From this time forward, our lives are changed. As Teresa shares, it is unlikely that anything will go back just the way it was before. However, that can be a good thing if we let it. Some familiar traditions will be modified while others will be adjusted to make room for brand new reflections and understandings. We learned this year that Easter can and will be more than just one day on the calendar. We learned to anticipate an Easter when we can all be together once more and give each other hugs, greet each other with warm handshakes and kisses. These are things we took for granted before but not anymore. There will be peace, joy, love, and feeding of others after this disruption. There will be compassion practiced with a new understanding after this crisis. There will be miracles which have gone unnoticed before that will now take center stage in our lives.

Composer and Nashville Disciple recording artist Andra Moran wrote a beautiful poem I want to conclude with for such a time as this:

“Here is a miracle, rising from the richness of the fertile ground.
Do you see it? A tiny green blade (touch), the natural world alive.
Here is a miracle, Do you feel it? (touch heart)
Rising within your being, each breath a gift.
For this moment, alive.
Here is a miracle, Can you believe it?
Rising even now in our precarious and precious world.
Jesus the Christ, our hope, Alive!”

Song – “Morning Has Broken”