

April 16, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Easter Sunday

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

“He is not here.”

Matthew 28:6a

I was raised on the adage of “a place for everything and everything in its place.” In my childhood home, whether you went looking for a hammer in the basement, a cake pan in the kitchen, or a particular book on the family room shelf, those things were always right where you expected them to be, where they'd been for as long as anyone could remember. If you needed to use one of those things, after you were done, it was expected that you'd return the item exactly where it had come from.

On vacation each summer with my brother and his family, in the same house that we've rented for years, we find ourselves spending time the first day or two putting back in order all the cabinets that have been disturbed by other renters in the past year. We want things back to the way we knew them to be when we'd first started renting. Certain items just belong in a certain place, and when I reach into that lower right hand cabinet I expect to be able to pull out the 1950s green metal mixing bowls that I like so much that I'm tempted, every summer, to sneak them into my luggage as we leave.

This desire to have everything in its rightful place is not simply obsessiveness (though perhaps it rests right on that edge) – it's about convenience and comfort and control.

(As a side note....Obsessiveness is more like a story that my sister-in-law tells, about cleaning out the basement after her grandfather had died. He was a hobby woodworker, and kept his tools and supplies in meticulous order. She found little bins

labeled “1 inch screws” and “10 penny nails” and so forth, but the label that brought her up short was the one that said, “Pieces of string too short to save.”)

We human beings are pattern-seeking creatures – it's comforting and reassuring to have things you can count on, places that look familiar, traditions that repeat. Phenomenon that are predictable and consistent, like gravity or the rising of the sun. Or, even, death.

They watched as Jesus was arrested, tried, nailed to a cross and left to die. They saw him carried away to a tomb, a cavelike structure, and witnessed his body being laid inside. They saw the large stone being rolled in front of the tomb's opening.

And then on the day after the sabbath, when once again work could be done, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial, something they couldn't do on the day he died because of the sabbath's arrival at sundown. Though they were upset at the way events had unfolded, and sad about the task ahead of them, still there was some comfort in carrying out the expected rituals and traditions of their faith.

Except, Jesus' body wasn't there. There was, instead, an angel who gave voice to the realization that was just beginning to dawn on the two women: he's not here. A place for everything and everything in its place – a dead body and a tomb / a tomb and a dead body – what could be a better match-up than that? Except, he's not here.

The tomb, which was intended by the Roman and religious authorities to be a permanent solution to the problem of Jesus, a place that could finally overcome and contain him – well, that didn't quite work out as they'd planned. Why? He's not here!

Jesus wouldn't stay in the place of death, where they thought he belonged. He found his way out of death, back to life and light. If you want to know where Jesus is, don't look where he was, because he's not there.

Over the next 50 days, Jesus would show up in a bunch of different places where his disciples and friends happened to be, to reassure them that he was with them, that they hadn't been abandoned. And though his public ministry was done, Jesus still had work to do with his closest friends and followers – equipping them to take over where he had left off, being his hands and feet in the world.

He appeared to his disciples over and over again, and yet, every time, they seemed surprised to see him. It took them a very long time to see him in a new way, to adjust their expectations, to let loose the notion of where a man who died was supposed to be,

To understand the reality of the resurrected Jesus, they had to turn themselves upside down.

And speaking of upside down, have you ever heard of something called a reverse poem? Picture it as a series of phrases laid out on a page, top to bottom. When you read the words in what seems to be the natural order – everything in its place – one meaning comes across; but if you read the lines in reverse order, from bottom to top, the meaning changes entirely. A sort of palindrome of phrases.

I stumbled across one of these reverse poems recently, and it happens to be all about our celebration here this morning:

*Easter is coming.
But for many of us, this is not the ultimate reality.
There is too much pain and suffering in the world today.
Death has the last word.
It would therefore be foolish to say that
The life and death of a first century Jew named Jesus makes a difference.
Why?
Might makes right.
Power is superior to compassion and
Despair is stronger than hope.
So I refuse to believe
A man can come back from the dead.
Sometimes, the most important facts are the hardest to accept.
Resurrection is a false hope.
How can you say
An empty tomb changes everything?
Don't you see (that)
"God loves the world"
Is a lie?
"Money is God"
and
"The one who dies with the most toys wins."
I will tell you what I tell my children:
There is no more to this world than what you can see, hold, and buy
There is no mystery in everyday life, and
There is nothing sacred about ordinary things and people.
Many of us simply do not believe that
God can give life to the dead, bring light from darkness, and create something out
of nothing.*

But what if the testimony of the women at the tomb was true?

Then...

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Death has the last word.
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But for many of us, this is not the ultimate reality.
Easter is coming.*

The scripture says that the women, after having heard from the angel the explanation of where Jesus was, left the tomb with fear and with joy.

Fear and joy – the twin feelings when something doesn't go according to plan. Fear at the disruption and uncertainty; joy at the glimmer of a possibility of the tiniest bit of hope...

That there is a different reality, if only we can see it in a different way. And that Easter – the triumph of life over death – is not only coming, but it's here. *Amen.*