

April 1, 2018 - Annunciation Episcopal Church - Easter Sunday

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"
John 20:16a

The writer, David Sedaris, tells about the language lessons he took when he first moved to France. The class, aimed at novice French speakers, included people from many different countries - Poland, Italy, Russia, Morocco; David was the only American. In their second month of study, the teacher introduced them to the personal pronoun, one, using an exercise that discussed secular and religious holidays. She posed questions like, what does one do on Bastille Day? Might one dance? Might one sing? - and the students were invited to answer using this new pronoun.

They worked their way through several holidays until they reached Easter. But before anyone could respond to the question, what does one do on Easter?, the student from Morocco interjected. "Excuse me, but what's an Easter? I have no idea what you're talking about." Being from a country that is nearly 99% Muslim, she wasn't familiar with this part of the Christian tradition. And so the other students jumped in and tried, in their very

rudimentary French, to explain Easter and Jesus and resurrection - the things we're celebrating today.

Here's how Sedaris recalls the conversation,

"It is," said one, "a party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus and you know, like that . . ."

She faltered, and her fellow countryman came to her aid.

"He call his self Jesus, and then he die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber."

The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm.

"He die one day, and then he go above of my head to live with your father."

"He weared the long hair, and after he died the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples."

"He nice, the Jesus."

"He make the good thing, and on the Easter we be sad because somebody make him dead today."

Sedaris goes on: "Part of the problem had to do with grammar. Simple nouns such as cross and resurrection were beyond our grasp, let alone such complicated reflexive phrases as "To give of yourself your only begotten son." Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead.

"Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb," the Italian nanny explained. "One, too, may eat of the chocolate."

"And who brings the chocolate?" the teacher asked.

I knew the word, and so I raised my hand, saying, "The Rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate."

My classmates reacted as though I had pinned the delivery on a house cat. They were mortified.

"A rabbit?"

The teacher, assuming I'd used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wiggling them as though they were ears. "You mean one of these? A rabbit rabbit?"

"Well, sure," I said. "He come in the night when one sleep on a bed. With a hand he have the basket, like for a bread."

The teacher sadly shook her head, as if this explained everything that was wrong with my country. "No, no," she said. "Here in France the chocolate is brought by a big bell that flies in from Rome."

From there, Sedaris says, the conversation devolved into a kind of argument about the merits of the symbols different countries use in telling the

story of Easter, of resurrection. Here in the U.S., we draw on springtime and new life imagery - flowers and rabbits and eggs and blades of pale green grass just emerging from the earth. In France, it's all about the bells (which stems from the tradition of prohibiting the ringing of bells during Lent, like we refrain from using the word Alleluia.) But as meaningful as any of these symbols might be - as much as they remind us of parts of the story of Jesus' triumph over death - they don't get at the fullness of it. They don't get at the willing sacrifice that Jesus made on behalf of us. They don't get at the fact that resurrection wasn't just about God getting Jesus out of his grave, but about God pulling us out of ours - the graves we'll experience once at our death, and the graves we find ourselves in many, many times during our lives.

What none of these symbols get at is that the story of Easter is a love story, the ultimate love story. The one that says, simply, that there isn't anything that God wouldn't do for us, including come among us in the person of Jesus, to live like us, and then offer himself up to a painful and humiliating death. All so we could live, all so we would know what love truly is.

Jesus' disciples and other friends and followers had learned, through their time with him, what love was, but now that he was dead, they were pretty sure that that was the end of it. They'd loved him and he'd loved them, and now they'd lost him. If only they'd appreciated more of the time they had with him. If only they'd paid more attention when he was trying to explain things to them. But sometimes the days were long and they were tired, and sometimes what he said was confusing or hard to hear.

For sure, they regretted their last few hours with him, the way they'd wandered off when he was arrested so they wouldn't risk being tagged as being one of his people. They'd been afraid, and so they'd run off. Cowardice and betrayal weren't much of a show of love.

That morning, though, early on the first day of the week, was a last chance to show their love. Mary Magdalene took the chance, and made her way to the tomb where she'd seen, as she watched from a distance, the body of Jesus be laid. There was nothing, really, she could do for him, but at least she could pay her respects, stand outside the tomb and be close to him, one last time.

But when she arrived, the stone blocking the tomb had been rolled away, and there was no body left inside. She left there, then went and told some of the other disciples who came and confirmed, sadly, what Mary Magdalene already knew to be true - he was gone. And she was heartbroken.

She'd been drawn to him, from the first time she met him. Jesus had called her to him, and after releasing her from the demons that had possessed her, he'd given her a new life. It was the same for his close circle of friends and the crowds that followed them everywhere - Jesus somehow drew people near him, and gave them new lives - lives of dignity and health and hope.

Mary wanted that again. She wanted, so much, to again be the person she was when she was with him, vital and confident and...alive. She wept for the loss of it all, the loss of him and the loss of her.

A man approached her as she was weeping. He was a gardener, maybe - a stranger. She explained why she was there at the tomb; perhaps the man had seen something that would be helpful to her.

Then the man spoke. The very particular mix of vibrations and sounds that was Mary's name reached her ears, and she knew it was him - the One who had freed her so long ago, the One who had given her back to herself. The One who loved her. She heard her name, and in a way she hadn't been able to do since he died, she found that she could breathe again. It's amazing what love can do.

That moment in the garden, that encounter between Mary and the newly risen Jesus that - how do we capture that in a symbol? Spring grass and eggs and flowers and bunnies - all those things which signify new life - they're just not enough for this moment.

And so I have another idea.

I came across a story recently, told on a podcast called This is Love. The show's curators look, as the name suggests, for stories of love, especially the kind of quiet, selfless love that is more abundant than we may realize, and which is constantly remaking the world, even if we're not aware of it.

The story I heard was about a tiny little thing, about a half inch long. A spider, a mother spider, of the black lace weaver variety.

In the spring, the black lace weaver mama sets about to have her family. She lays two sets of eggs - one set which will become her children, and the other set, called trophic eggs, which will serve as food when her spiderlings first hatch. She sets all this up on her web, and then she waits.

When the babies emerge, they immediately set about eating the trophic eggs, but they need more - that meal is not enough to sustain them. And so their mother, from the other side of the web, calls them to her. She does it not with words or sounds, but with vibration. She strums on the threads of the web, and the babies respond, moving toward her, drawn by the pulsing movement. She calls their names, as it were, and then she gives herself to her babies. She lets them consume her - her body gives them their life, makes it possible for them to live for the next 3 to 4 weeks until they're big enough to go out into the world on their own.

So there it is - a symbol for selfless love that gives life. (I'm so sorry if you don't like spiders, but even if you don't, maybe you can appreciate them a little more, knowing what the mama black weaver spider does.)

God gave of God's self in the person of Jesus, who gave of *himself*, down to his very life, just so that we could live. Calling us to him, like he called to Mary, so we will be sustained. This is love. This is Easter.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed - Alleluia!