

REMEMBER!
An Easter Sermon by Joe Hoffman
April 8, 2007
Luke 24:1-12

Easter is about transformation and power and freedom. It is about an experience that startles our soul in a way that changes us forever. It is a power of love and grace that embraces the world. Peter Gomes says: “Easter is when life begins. When we figure out that we have full possession of our lives, that we need not fear even death. Life begins when we figure out we can live life while we are still alive.” (from his Easter sermon in his book Sermons.)

Each of the gospel writers tells the story differently. We have a tendency to tell it as if it is just one story – but there is power in the variety of story traditions. It is good to pay attention to the nuances in each account. Matthew thinks of this experience as having cosmic dimensions, and the power of this story includes an earthquake that moves the stone from the entrance to the tomb. John’s account is the most familiar perhaps, as the two disciples run to the tomb on the first day of the week, find it empty, and as they run back to tell the others, Mary lingers at the tomb and Jesus meets her there and calls her name.

Mark tells a very simple story that ends almost in mid sentence – with little excitement or fanfare. And with no resurrection appearance at all – just the promise that Jesus will come to them soon.

Luke follows Mark’s story, but adds some different perspectives including several unique resurrection stories not found in any other gospel – like the walk to Emmaus which follows the verses we have heard this morning.

We can see that there are different traditions at play and that there is not one story alone – but there is a common thread in all the stories. The grave could not hold the power of God’s love in Jesus. The tomb was empty. But no one was a witness to the resurrection. All the gospel stories name it as already having happened. It is left to divine mystery.

And it is also consistent that just as Jesus did not die – he was killed, so Jesus did not rise from the dead – he was raised. God is the one who acts. God is the one who has the power in the story. God is the one who has power in life.

We are witnesses to the presence and power of God that is stronger than death or fear. How resurrection happens is not the point. Let mystery be mystery. The power is in what it means to us. How we take it in and let it be part of our new beginning.

We have too often become shut ins to our own fears. We often shut ourselves off from all that has the potential to hurt or damage us. We often shut ourselves off to possibilities of life because we are afraid of what has already hurt us. We roll the stone in front of our own tombs to protect what little of ourselves we can protect. But Easter changes that.

Easter rolls the stone away and opens the door to freedom for those who are ready to live. Easter is an act of God bringing healing and hope to the world through the power of love and forgiveness.

This past week I attended a panel discussion on Loving Families, the final program of the Love Makes a Family project. Alan Robinson, a friend and neighbor of mine and Noel's, was one of the panelists and he shared a story from his childhood. When he was young, he and the neighborhood kids liked to play a game they named "Bury the Hose." They would take the garden hose, still connected to the spigot, and would bury the end of it in the sand box. They would take all the sand they could and would pile it over the top of the hose, which they buried in a hole. And then, someone would gently turn the water on. Just a little. Just a trickle. And they would wait.

After a while, the water would begin to bubble up somewhere – and the game was to guess where it would be – and then, when it came, they would throw more sand on it – until it bubbled up somewhere else – and then more sand – and so on. It was a race to see if the sand or the water would win. And the water always won. After enough time, the sandbox would be filled with water and sand floating all around. And eventually the water and sand would overflow the sandbox itself – for the box could not hold the fluidity, the power of the water.

Alan reflected on this simple game and said – as I got older, I realized that the game was like my life. I would bury all my fears and hurts – I would bury the real me - but then, something would happen and part of me that I had tried to hide away would come bubbling back up to the surface. And I realized that it would always be that way until I could find a healing for that which caused me such pain. Until I could freely live the life that I was given to live. To be me.

I have thought a lot about his story. For me it is an Easter story. A simple and quiet Easter story. Much like Luke's version of the story. No earthquakes, no cosmic events. But the source of life continues to flow in us, seeking wholeness and well being, and it cannot be stopped by a stone in front of the tomb or by sand covering the hose buried in the ground. The living water of life continues to flow. It is a quiet resurrection. And the meaning comes when we remember – remember what we have buried, remember what we are afraid of, remember who and what we are called to be and do – by the God who gives us life.

The women went to the tomb – and they found it empty. Fear and death were gone. Two angelic messengers appear and ask – why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember what Jesus said to you. Remember what you already know. Remember!

In this context, remembering is not about the re-living the past but is a clue to the future. Remember what Jesus taught, remember how he lived, and now, live in that way ourselves.

The social movement of Jesus, according to John Dominic Crossan, sought to “rebuild a society on religious and economic egalitarianism. Society likes to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchy, maintain discriminations. Jesus brought a new vision – not a political revolution but a social movement from the imagination’s most dangerous depths. (Crossan, A Biography of Jesus)

Remember this – and continue the movement. Don’t be afraid.

Easter comes when we remember the vision. When we open our shut in fears and allow God to transform us into new life. Easter comes when we are open to God’s encouragement and empowerment. What Jesus said and did in his day was unacceptable to the people of that time – and it still is in our world today. Because it is so radical as to love all people, honor all differences, embody all diversity. The living water of God will not stay hidden in the ground. It is going to find room to flow.

I read in the paper yesterday with great interest of the actions of the NC senate to apologize for the role of the government in perpetuating slavery. You see, the water hose has been running all this time, and the hurt from those days of such injustice has continued to fester and feeding our current systems of racism, and now the healing can begin again in a new way because the living water of love and grace will not be denied. And this grace is for all of us. We all carry the wounds of such pain and suffering until the world is healed. Easter opens the way for the healing.

And in the mystery of resurrection – where death and hurt lose their power and love and life find their way – the risen Christ emerges as a new presence among us. Christ is more than Jesus. Christ is the living reminder. Christ is the new presence of God in our midst – a presence that is beyond race or gender or human form – it is God embodied in us and God’s spirit flowing through us. And that is all we need. To remember that we become the vessels of God on earth. We are not alone. Death is not the final word. Hope lives. Living water cannot and will not be held back.

It is God who brings us Easter power. We have come today to be present to the transforming power of God’s love and grace. To remember who we are. To let God’s love bubble up in us and wash our fear away. To take away our deadness and transform us back to life.

Hazel Schoonmaker is a member of our church who lives at Highland Farms. She is no longer able to come and be with us, but she and her husband Ted, who died a few years ago, were part of that core group about 12 years ago that said – there is still more life that God wants to live through us here at First Congregational United Church of Christ. They believed that and helped bring new life to this congregation.

Noel and I spent some time with Hazel yesterday evening – and with her two daughters who have flown in from New York and California. We spent some time remembering. As we sat together in a circle, one of the daughters read us a book Hazel had written for children back in 1972. It was entitled Blast Off. In that book, Hazel teaches the children

that they are meant to be active, creative beings. That is what it means to be a child. The challenge of childhood is to grow into yourself. To take on your life. And all of that is good.

She then ties that process of living into ourselves into Jesus actions of love. And she says – this is what we are all to do – so do it ... now!

I think that is what the message of Easter is. Be yourself. Don't bury the hose and hide your life away. Whoever you are, whatever your reality, be yourself and let God's love find its way in you. Do it now.

We sat there remembering. I think that must be what the disciples did when they found the grave empty. Remembering what Jesus had taught them. Remembering how he said – live your life now. Put love into action. Be freedom people. Do it now.

That is why we are here. To remember. To let Easter love loosen the shut in, held back, hidden away parts of us that long to be set free. That is what Easter power can do. Remember! Remember! Remember!