

An Everlasting Love

Jeremiah 31: 1-6

Acts 10: 34-43

John 20: 1-18

April 12, 2020—*Easter Sunday*

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Jeremiah 31: 1-6

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: “Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.”

Acts 10: 34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

John 20: 1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to

them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

(A few bars of Easter music.....)

This is the Easter we know. Joy, triumph, celebration, a glorious sunrise, special music, Easter bonnets and brunch, tulips and lilies. We gather together to celebrate what we have anticipated since Palm Sunday, and throughout the betrayal, violence and desertion of Holy Week. We know what to expect when Easter arrives, and we have eagerly awaited the day. Jesus Christ has risen as love's redeeming work is done, and we gladly sing out our 'Alleluias!' The stone has been rolled back, the tomb is empty, and so we raise our triumphs high. We know, we see, that we are indeed loved with an everlasting love.

This is the Easter we know today as well, although it looks, and is, very different from any Easter we have ever known. This year, more than ever, we need the hopes, promises and resurrection of Easter. We need to remember that this year, just like every other Easter, we are a resurrection people. Our, faith, hope and trust in God's faithfulness, promises and blessings are grounded in the resurrection in ways that have long term, eternal meaning, as well as right now, this day, this minute. Resurrection is hope coming to life, and every day we live with, and are strengthened by, this awareness. Every day, whether life is routine, or the world is in crisis and chaos, resurrection is hope coming to life.

Easter faith in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, points us in hope to the possibility that God really is working to make all things new. With Jesus we rise, and each Easter we are reminded of this renewal that is not just a belief, but a way of life. All things are being made new as even in the midst of illness, pandemic, fear and loss, new life springs forth in the commitment of those on the front lines working, risking, for all of us staying home, as the earth has begun to heal in some ways as life on the entire planet is quieted, as priorities and values are thoughtfully reassessed, and as people find new ways to be together in community while safely apart. Resurrection is hope coming to life from the One who loves us with an everlasting love.

On this Easter morning we can understand the experiences of the eye-witnesses in a way that we never have done before. In the shadow of the pandemic, it's oppressive impact on everyone and everywhere, we can better understand the disciples, and all those who were waiting for the Messiah to redeem them from the oppression of the Roman Empire, someone to avenge the injustices, deliver them, and offer the world and promises of the psalmist, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again, I will build you, and you shall be built...! Again, you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again, you shall plant vineyards..... the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit."

The first Easter came as Easter came today for us. No fanfare, no parades. In fact, it almost came as a whisper. And it came as an unfolding event from discovery, to sharing, to weeping, to telling. The event that forever changed the world happened without anyone noticing at first. The disciples, the men closest to Jesus had fled, scattered and hid at their homes after Jesus was crucified and was then anointed and buried by two men who had secretly been following Jesus.

This Easter we find ourselves scattered like the first disciples, each in our own homes. And this is as it should be given the risks this pandemic brings. The disciples were grieving, and they feared the authorities; we fear that we or our loved ones will become sick, we worry how we as a community, as a nation, as a world, will recover from all the effects of the virus and the necessary social isolation.

We are saddened, disappointed, that our churches are empty, but we rejoice that the tomb is empty. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that as people of faith we always have hope in what can be overcome despite the odds. We see that every cross has a resurrection.

We are not eye-witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. We did not see the stone rolled away, we did not run to other disciples, we did not enter the tomb and see the linens folded or the angels seated. We did not weep because Jesus was missing. But we do bear witness to the truth, the power and the love of Jesus' resurrection as we affirm and live in the ways that Jesus taught us to do. In our own lives we can recognize little resurrections of our own when we have overcome challenges, fears, hardships, pain and despair and rose to a new life.

Like the other disciple, the one that Jesus loved, we believe, even though we have not seen the risen Christ. We believe because we have seen the wrappings left behind, the signs and stories of his earthly life, and because the tomb is empty. The disciple Jesus loved believed that Jesus had risen when he saw the linen wrappings lying there, because he already believed that Jesus had done what he said he would do. He would die and rise. For this disciple that Jesus loved, he believed because the tomb was empty. Because the tomb was empty, he would go forth in faith sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

What does that mean for us all today, that the tomb is empty? What does that mean for you?

Does that mean that you will live your life with more intention, purpose and drive to know what Jesus intends for us to do with our lives? For me, because the tomb is empty, I know and believe the good news. Jesus Christ is risen. New life happens no matter what, and we are indeed loved with an everlasting love. Amen.

Note:

As we moved through Holy Week, I invited people to share their answer to this statement, 'Because the tomb is empty, I...and have received beautiful, profound and encouraging responses that I now share with you:

Because the tomb is empty:

- I want to live my life with more intention, purpose and drive to know what Jesus intends for me to do with my life.
- I know that injustice doesn't have the last word
- That hope and life abound
- I trust in the Lord
- Guilt doesn't have the last word in our lives

-I am thinking expectantly, wondering whether during this period of universal Lent, that the events of Easter week will be a springboard for further reflection and deepening of my personal faith

-That the universal world will truly mark this as a time when its collective response will be one of hope, caring and reasonableness as we continue.

-It strikes me that this Lenten season, with its arbitrary sacrifice on the part of everyone, has miraculously showcased how much we are fortunate to live here in NH.

Blessed be.