

Easter Day, April 21, 2019 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Acts 10:34-43, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

So a friend of mine was out driving one day – right around this time of year – when quite suddenly a blur rushed out from the bushes beside the road and banged into the side of his car. He was horrified, he thought a deer had run into his car. So he stopped and went to look. There was a rabbit lying in the road. Beside the rabbit was a basket, filled with painted eggs. Then it dawned on him – this was the Easter bunny, and he was dead, and my friend had killed him! As he stood there, another car appeared in the distance. As it got closer it slowed down and stopped, and a woman got out. She walked over, looked down, nodded, then immediately went to the trunk of her car and got a spray can. She came back and sprayed it on the Easter Bunny, who immediately jumped up, alive! He collected his eggs and bounced down the road; every 20 feet he turned around and waved, before disappearing into the bushes. My friend was stunned! “What’s in that can?” he asked. She showed it to him. The label said “Hair (Hare) Spray. Guaranteed to put new life in dead hair (hare). Adds permanent wave.”

Okay, I couldn’t resist! I told this joke the first Easter I was here, in 2001, so it seemed fitting to re-tell it on my last Easter with you as your rector!

Okay, back to the other story for today, which is absolutely not a joke, not funny, though it is – it seems to me – one filled with laughter and joy. I’m pretty certain you all know this story we’ve just heard! It’s a story about transformation that begins with uncertainty, moves through terror (not just fear; terror) to enlightening memory, stops by some paternalistic dismissal, and ends up with amazement and joy.

And isn’t that last stopping place the one we hope for in this life? That all the uncertainties of our journey, all the moments of fear – even of terror – will fade. That all those difficult times that never seem to take “no” for an answer, will dissolve into a robust certainty; that they’ll fade even when others seek to dismiss our journeys – and therefore, us – as irrelevant or meaningless. That they’ll fade even though for a moment – perhaps a season – perhaps longer – those fears, uncertainties, and people *have* held us in thrall. Isn’t that what we hope for, all the time? That, in the end, we’ll be able finally to go home, in all the richness and joy of the meaning of that metaphor – go home to the place we always wanted ‘home’ to be, even if it never was; the place where – we hope most of all – we encounter love, and those who love, and those we love, where hearts filled with love dwell – for as Lord Byron said, “..without hearts there is no home.” (Don Juan).

This is a day that speaks to the core of human existence; it says that all of those doubts, and fears, and uncertainties; all of those who have held us in thrall – ultimately they can’t triumph over us. This story says all that, quite specifically, of the person who of all Jesus’ disciples seemed the most challenged – Peter; even he could ultimately go home in amazement – and, it’s quite clear – with joy, a joy that transformed him into a new person: fearless, committed, faithful.

I’ve been using the word “us” a lot, but the way that Jesus’ resurrection has come to be portrayed in western Christianity – in writing, in art, in theology – is very individualistic. Whether it’s

Raphael or Rubens or an El Greco, or something very contemporary, *it's all about Jesus*. It's Jesus' resurrection – only his, no one else's – that's most often celebrated this day. That's why it's so wonderfully appropriate that today's reading from the Letters (which is what "epistle" means) is part of the first one St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian community. They were going through some tough times – social divisions, wealth inequity, issues of hunger and excessive consumption, patriarchy, arguments over worship forms, over who should be the leadersnothing like today!!

In that context, 1 Corinthians is a tour de force. Paul offers the Corinthian community a vision for a life lived in faith, a life of following, a life of joy and transformation. His vision isn't individualistic, it's communal; it only works if the whole community's involved.

He presents his vision in this letter in three, unequal parts.

Part one, most of the letter – chapters one through twelve – is all about what a life of faith does and doesn't look like, including how to structure a community so that it's ready to do the work of God by living as an organic body – and not just any body, but the body of Christ, crucified and risen; as if, in other words, everything they did, everything they said, everything they were, was imbued with Christ.

The last part – the third part, chapters fourteen through sixteen – is all about resurrection and resurrection living, and what is and isn't true about it, and about the community that lives a resurrected life.

Part one: faith. Part three: hope. That leaves chapter 13, which is about – what? Love. The central chapter, with parts one and three acting almost as book-ends, bracketing chapter 13. "Faith, hope, and love abide," Paul says, "and the greatest of these is.....love."

Love lies at the heart of everything. Love lies at the heart of the story from Luke we hear today: God's love, that would not let Jesus be lost, and will not let us be lost either; all that's required of us is to reach out and grasp that helping hand.

In the Orthodox Churches – so stepped in icons – the vision of Jesus' resurrection isn't individualistic. In its most advanced form, Jesus kneels down and is literally pulling all the condemned out of Hades, and particularly Adam and Eve, one on each side of him; each one gets one of his hands. This is not just about Adam, this vision, as even Paul seemed to think, contrasting the first Adam with Jesus, the second Adam; Eve is a co-equal partner, which means this vision is of an equal-opportunity resurrection of the dead. And not just that, it's about everyone, not only Jesus, starting with Adam and Eve – those most condemned of Old Testaments figures, who are so often identified as those who caused humanity to go off the rails in the first place. Jesus starts with them, and continues with everyone else. Jesus' resurrection, in this iconography is emptying hell. Yes, can say, in response to the Easter acclamation "Alleluia, Christ is risen," that "He is risen indeed! Alleluia." what's missing are four words: "And so are we."

The work of salvation continues. As Jesus' followers – as those who have experienced the small and large deaths – crucifixions – that come with being human, AND as those who have experienced the small and large resurrections that come with being human, – as Jesus' followers we are best placed to continue the work he began with his resurrection – to reach down into all the hells that human beings can experience and haul them up with love.

That means that this day – so full of joy and celebration, so focused on faith and hope and love – invites us to pick up the baton that this day represents, and respond to the one question left unanswered: how are we going to exercise our responsibility as followers of the Resurrected One toward those who are still on their crosses, those who are still living in their own hells?

Now there's a question for the future!