

Easter Sunday – Year A – April 12, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Acts 10: 34-43, Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3: 1-4 and John 20: 1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It is Easter, a day of celebration, of joy and of thankfulness. It is the day we re-member the Resurrection of Jesus the Savior. Re-member, Re, hyphen member. Re-member, in the sense of bringing back into our present lives once again. Re-member, in the sense of bringing into present reality the truth of the Resurrection. Re-membering, knowing that Jesus is risen in our lives not only as an event 2,000+ years ago, but as an event here and now.

Resurrection for me is something that is best known through symbol rather than theological explanation. I know resurrection as a reality in my life when it breaks into my consciousness in unexpected ways. Like faith, resurrection is always a reality, present even when we don't feel it, know it, even when we doubt it. It is a mystery, part of the great mystery that is God. As mystery it is something I believe without being able to explain or understand it. I know it with my heart and soul even if my head can't quite catch up.

The symbol or image of resurrection for me this year occurred while I was walking Dolly, my Jack Russell. It was early morning, semi-dark, cold and lonely. She was on her usual morning "route" a path we take most mornings. I was simply walking along thinking about nothing so much as the coffee that awaited me at home. We walked past a huge tangle of blackberry canes. They were old, dry, brown and looked dead. Garbage, paper wrappers, coffee cups, plastic bags and other trash was caught deep within the thorny vines. And then, like a little bit of miracle I saw it. Nestled within the tangle of vines was a small green stalk. The stalk was bravely taking a stand in the midst of all that seemed like death and ugliness. Day by day I watched, each morning anticipating the change that might be visible. I worried that the stalk would somehow be damaged or destroyed, but no—each day it grew stronger and stronger, taller and taller. One day the stalk had at it's tip a bloom, a yellow blossom, a daffodil. In the center of all the brown, dry, brittle vines was life. Resurrection. That isn't quite the end of the story. As I continued to walk this route and to look for changes in the flower, I noticed that in the way of all living things, the bloom began to fade and the stalk became less strong. Finally, one morning, the bloom drooped and then was finished. In a brief moment it seemed as if the resurrection I had witnessed was over. But, resurrection is never over, never finished. As I mourned the passing of the flower, I noticed something else. The dry, brittle, brown and thorny blackberry canes had begun to bud. Over the next few mornings, it could be seen that they were leafing out. Resurrection was happening in a place I had least expected to see it. Resurrection was alive and well, re-membered.

I think of the women at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified, I think of the disciple whom Jesus loved and who was there with the women. I think of all of the disciples who later gathered in the upper room in fear about what came next. That tangle of blackberry vines reminds me of them. Reminds me of how they must have felt. Dead and brittle, frightened and not knowing what might come next. They were in the sort of limbo of grief and despair we have all experienced.

Mary Magdalene did not expect resurrection when on the morning of the first day of the week she went to the tomb of Jesus. She went to weep, perhaps to pray or simply to be near to Jesus. She was shocked to see the stone rolled away, and her thought was that someone had stolen the body of Jesus.

She ran to tell the others. Peter and John came at once and entered the empty tomb. They saw the evidence that Jesus' body was gone. The scripture tells us that John "saw and believed." But believed what exactly. Only John in that moment knew what he believed. Just as each of us in those moments when our faith is challenged knows what we believe.

Peter and John we are told returned to their homes, returned I imagine to ponder and wonder at what they had seen with their own eyes. They did not yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. They did not understand what this would mean. It was a mystery to be thought about, considered, prayed over and ultimately a mystery to believe. It became the mystery to which they gave their hearts and souls. It became the mystery that consumed their lives.

Mary remained by the tomb, weeping, she could not comprehend what had happened, she only knew that the body of her Lord was gone. In Semitic culture, to give something a name is to imbue it with soul. The soul is that place where we hold our faith, our hope and our love of God. The soul is the place in our lives where we touch the divine. As Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, in despair and doubt, Jesus came to stand near her. At first she did not know him, but when he called her by name, in some manner her soul was enlivened and she knew that he had truly been resurrected. All that within her soul was lifeless, brown and brittle, like the blackberry vines, all of that was renewed. All of the despair, the doubt, the sorrow was gone to be replaced by the faith, hope and love that she had known with Jesus. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples that she had seen the Lord. She had seen the resurrected reality of Christ. She had seen the scripture fulfilled. Alleluia. He is risen, the Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

That isn't the end of the story of course, only the end of a chapter. The days ahead for the disciples were not easy. They were persecuted, imprisoned, beaten and killed. They were hunted and driven out of their homes. There were thorns and dry brittle times. They sometimes doubted and knew fear as they pondered what God had done in raising Jesus from the dead. Doubt, and even fear is part of faith, a mature and realistic faith the kind of faith to which we are all called. Even when we experience doubt and fear, at the core of our faith is the knowledge of the resurrection, the knowledge that no matter how hard, how lifeless, how thorny life gets, God walks with us. In the resurrection we know the presence of God. Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Happy Easter.