



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

EASTER GARDENING

Easter Sunday
March 31, 2013

John 20.1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance of the tomb. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him." So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus's head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead).

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she looked into the tomb, and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus's body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Why are you crying," he asked. "Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out "Teacher." Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

In the final week of January each year, the late Jake Walters, long-time pillar of this church and Chancel Choir bass, would wait expectantly for the Burpee seed catalogue to come in the mail. It was there each year, on time, as predictable as the spring the catalogue foretold with its enticing pictures of green beans and red tomatoes. Jake was a happy man that last week of January, for this was for him the first sign of spring. He didn't have to wait for the robins to return or the crocus to push their way through the snow. That seed catalogue was all he needed to actuate spring in the dead of winter.

As a springtime event, Easter portends new life in the richness of its symbols. Interestingly, Easter is the only Christian holy day that is set by the moon, it always being the first Sunday after the first full moon that follows the spring equinox. This season of new life is heralded in the secular and the sacred alike with images of Easter bunnies, Easter baskets, colored Easter eggs, Easter Sunday clothes, Easter egg hunts and Easter family gatherings around the dining room table. Very early on Christian interpretations of Easter drew on springtime imagery, picturing humans caught up in a new, redemptive and unending form of springtime renewal. The church saw itself becoming a springtime garden of the new creation cultivated by Christ, and each member of the community gardeners who plant the seeds of hope and joy in the midst of the winters of the soul. The images of new life were vital in bringing what **could** be understood about life into those mysterious events of the biblical narrative that they couldn't comprehend.

But that's the second paragraph of this sermon. Here's the lead: While these events of new life are completely natural in the course of the earth's seasons, resurrection is a completely unnatural occurrence. It takes place outside the ordinary, outside the explainable. Each of the resurrection stories recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John comes to us through a different lens but all of them agree on the completely otherworldly nature of the event. We expect the dead to stay dead; no one expects to encounter the deceased three days after the funeral. To heighten the drama of the unnatural, Matthew paints the picture of a violent earthquake and blazing light when Jesus appears suddenly to the frightened disciples on the run. Luke's does it with Jesus as a peripatetic teacher, walking along the road, asking questions and ultimately sitting down to dinner with his astounded companions. Mark has no appearance of the risen Christ at all and in John's story, Jesus rises from the ground in a springtime garden as the gardener. Each told his own version of the story to stress the outrageous reality of a seemingly unbelievable event.

What are we to make of this unnatural event? What stories might we offer to give meaning to this unnatural occurrence of resurrection? The ancient story is so like a contemporary sci-fi movie we are prone to give credence to it at church but shun its reality when we get home. It is not an explainable event. We shouldn't even try. We can't comprehend it. We have nothing in our natural experience with which to compare it. The disciples didn't know what to do with it either until they encountered the risen Jesus in human form. And that becomes our best source of belief as well.

We cannot prove anything about its reality but we do see evidence of its power. We experience light in the darkness, life amid death, hope that overpowers despair and joy that triumphs over apathy. We see Pope Francis washing the feet of female juvenile inmates in an expression of unconditional and inclusive love, ignoring the angry criticism of his bishops who don't want him hobnobbing with ordinary people, especially young women in prison. Within our own congregation, particularly during this past year when we've experienced so many with serious illness, I've observed people reaching out in redemptive caring and in so doing become the body of Christ in fallible flesh. The news of an ill Nelson Mandela reminds us of an aged, extraordinary man who has given his entire life to combat the evils of an oppressive apartheid in South Africa. And when I heard this week that Rush Limbaugh said that gay marriage was inevitable, I sensed something of the power of the resurrected Jesus, for only Jesus could have performed that miracle!

These stories tell of natural occurrences that are profoundly moving but explainable in the context of life. Yet they are evidence of resurrection's power that brings God's supernatural world into our own, influencing for good what might otherwise be disaster. Resurrection is beyond our human imagination to comprehend; so mysterious we can only grasp it with symbols of spring and new life. The world as God would have it comes in part, empowered by the one who did something completely unique that first Easter.

Resurrection may be about what happens after we leave this earth but I'm glad to leave that to God. It will be what it will be and I will not spend time being concerned about it. I'm more interested in what this event means for the way we live today: the way we treat our neighbor and our enemy; the way we find strength to cope with the most difficult of situations; the courage we muster to put our life on the line for someone else; the hope we create by advocating for those living in the margins of our societies; the solidarity we exhibit by standing with someone else in their trauma. It isn't limited to the greats like Pope Francis or Nelson Mandela. We are all gardeners in this world, tending the prickly rose bushes of unpopular social concerns, planting seeds of hope with stories of successful outcomes; cultivating the fine art of sitting by the bedside of a friend so the caretaker can get away for a bit; fixing a leaking pipe for someone unable to afford a plumber; consoling a frightened friend with gentle words of hope.

A story from the days of the Nazi regime lingers in my mind as we stand on the brink of the important remembrance with our Jewish sisters and brothers next Sunday. The SS had stopped a train in order to arrest undocumented Jews. A man at the back of the train car felt the woman beside him tense up, become agitated and begin to cry. He asked her what was wrong. "I don't have papers," she said. "They will take me away." At once the man began to berate her, to scream at her and call her all manner of names. His agitation soon drew the attention of the guards who came quickly to the back. By this time the woman was in hysterics. The SS demanded to know the meaning of the outbreak to which the man replied that this stupid wife of his had forgotten her documents at home. "I've told her over and over again never to leave them at home but does she listen? She's such an idiot. She's so incompetent, even when I remind her." After looking at the man's papers the guards left the car laughing at the old man's anger and the woman's stupidity. At the next stop, the woman thanked the man as she left the train and stepped onto the platform. She had never seen this man before but she owed her life to this one who risked his own life for hers.

To look back at the resurrection is to look the wrong way; the story compels us to look ahead, to keep our eyes open for gardeners who come from nowhere, to keep our ears open for the tell-tale sobs of fear, to keep our hearts open to the intense needs of others. And then to act in natural, human ways empowered by this extraordinarily unnatural resurrection, for it is more than an event in the past; it is a journey for the future. This is the resurrection at its best.

We will never comprehend in this life the import of this resurrection in the garden, or understand its power beyond the grave. But each year we read the story again and realize that our Burpee seed catalogue has just arrived.

--Rev. Gary L. McCann