

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-17

John 20:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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Messy Resurrection

Every year around Easter, a short video clip gets circulated among my clergy friends. It's a brief comedy sketch of a pastor preparing for Easter Sunday. I have watched this video more than a few dozen times and every time, I laugh right from the opening line: "Okay, everyone, listen up-this is Easter-shuttles and golfcarts in the parking lot." The whole sketch is about impressing visitors on Easter and the lengths churches will go to do just that. He continues with lines like "No, we don't have ministry time, we do have a petting zoo outside though... who trimmed these hedges, a youth intern? For heaven's sake! We don't *need* new members, but did we get the rose petals in the visitor parking spaces? We are pro Jesus and pro Easter bunny. For one Sunday, please, can we just not be weird?" ☺

It's funny because it hits little truths. And for many churches, Easter really is like a "show off day." Now if you're visiting with us today, I do hope you're impressed. This is a pretty great faith community to be a part of. We add the little frills and bells on Easter Sunday because we are here in joy. Our story tells us that death did not win. That new life began and that it began in the dark. Hope alive. Good news indeed.

But sometimes I think when we wear our Easter best and clean up and polish up for one high holy Sunday, when we actually get sucked into the high expectations to be perfect, to try and write an amazing sermon (point to self), to make sure we do not sing one note off key...we end up representing ourselves in a disingenuous way. I'm not saying beautiful music or the frills and whistles and dressing up in Sunday best are bad things. But I think it can subtly reinforce a message that we too, must be polished, neat, perfect and have it all together in order to be here or to be faithful...that we must somehow be without doubt, and "get it" in order to come to church-to come before God...and if this Holy Week has taught us anything, it has taught us that that is not the gospel story at all.

You see, that first Easter was nothing like how we represent it now. (In fact, it's more like this sunrise service, which is why I love it...) It begins while it is still dark. And yes, I'm sure that's a literal interpretation of how the sun hadn't risen yet, but I think it's also a metaphorical one. While it was still dark... you see, for these disciples, the flashes of memory were still fresh in their hearts and minds. The way Jesus knelt and washed their feet much to their bewilderment, when he broke the

bread and shared the cup with them one last time, when they went to the garden and he asked them to stay awake and pray with him and they fell asleep... for Peter, the guilt of denying him not once but 3 times... "I don't know him" still echoing in his heart while Jesus was on trial to be put to death. The shouts of "crucify" when they realized that Jesus was not going to save the crowds in the way they thought. For the women who were there, seeing Jesus on the cross. And for the silence of that Holy Saturday-the day in between-the first full day of grief and loss and heartbreak... while it was still dark.

These disciples were deep in guilt and grief. No one was wearing their Sunday best that first Easter morning. There were no trumpets when they saw the empty tomb and even the angels were quickly dismissed. In fact, Mary Magdalene sees Jesus first because she chose to remain in the darkness. Peter and the beloved disciple look into the empty tomb and leave but Mary stays, confused, lost and weeping. She's willing to remain. And even then, when she is the first to witness the risen Christ, she thinks Jesus is the gardener. She accuses him of taking the body!

Nadia Bolz-Weber in her book "Pastrix" writes that perhaps Mary mistook Jesus as the gardener because Jesus still had the dirt from his own tomb under his nails. She writes, "We don't usually see *this* image of the risen Christ-it's as if he needed to be cleaned up for Easter visitors so he looked more impressive and so no one would be offended by the truth...my experience, however, is that the God of Easter is a God with dirt under his nails."

Friends, I don't know why, but this image of the risen Christ, the one who shows up to those deep in grief and guilt with dirt under his nails, mistaken for a gardener, this brings me an immense amount of comfort today. It brought me an immense amount of comfort as I was writing this Easter sermon. Why? Because it's a God who shows up *as a mess in the mess*. A God who shows up *as a mess in the mess*. Yup. Even on Easter Sunday.

I have been privileged to be present to you as best as I could these past few months as we have undergone another pastoral transition. We will have a new interim pastor who begins tomorrow. Last time I walked with you through a transition, I had some warning and I did not have children. I have felt incredibly loved and supported by this congregation and I hope you have felt the same from me. Many of you have commented and shared openly with me gratitude and impressed that I have held it together. But the truth is, even if it *looks* that way, things are messy. Literally, our house, is messy. I have not been a patient mother in the ways in which I would like to be patient, and of course, my 4-year-old's spring break fell this past week, during Holy Week. I felt all the guilty feelings of not being able to do fun things with him and confess he was in front of the TV many more hours than we'd

like. Meals have mostly consisted of pizza, corndogs, rice and spam. I'm not even exaggerating that rotation. If you didn't hear a vegetable in that meal rotation, that is correct. ☺

Along with that mommy guilt, I started getting sucked into the pressure of having a glorious Easter sermon, not necessarily to impress everyone, but because as an associate pastor, I rarely to never get to preach Easter Sunday...so I was putting myself into a strange place of trying to make sure I had something wonderful to share with you all this morning because "here's my chance!"

I started getting sucked into the lens of looking at everything through how I am lacking (it's super easy for me to do, by the way-anyone else too?), but then as I read the gospel lesson again, I realized how imperfect, how messy, and how grief laden that first Easter story is...and how God shows up in that whole mess. God does not show up in fanfare, pretty Easter outfits, with trumpets, or even in an amazing sermon. God just shows up and I am reminded that throughout scripture God shows up in every day ordinary things...in bread, wine, water, in sickness, in healing, in a manger, a mother's womb, and yes, even in an empty tomb. God shows up in the mess with dirt under their nails.

So the question is not "how can I write an amazing sermon" or "what kind incredible music can we share" or what new Easter outfit should I buy or wear, but rather, yes, even on this Easter morning, am I willing to see God in the ordinary, messiness of life? Am I willing to confess and admit that things are not perfect. I can't make it perfect. How can I shift my lens to see the reality of the gift of new life that is in front of me?

You see, in John's version of the Easter story, what we see are individual people having profoundly different encounters with the empty tomb and the risen Christ. When Peter sees the empty tomb, he runs away. When the beloved disciple sees it, scripture tells us he believes but not sure what it is he believes yet. And when Mary first sees, she cries and waits.

In an essay on the resurrection, theologian and writer Chris Barnes reminds us of what actually matters during Holy Week: "The question that Easter asks of us is not, 'Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?' ...What the Gospels ask is not, 'Do you believe?' but rather, 'Have you encountered the risen Christ?'"

Debie Thomas writes, "In other words, we come to the empty tomb as ourselves, for good or for ill. We don't shed our baggage ahead of time; it barges in with us and shapes our perceptions and conclusions. What matters, then, is encountering the risen Jesus in the particulars of our own messy lives. What matters is finding in the

empty tomb the hope we need for our own struggles, losses, traumas, and disappointments. Whatever universal claims we make as Christians must begin in the rich, fertile ground of our own hearts, our own stories. Whatever acclamations we cry out on Easter Sunday must begin with a willingness to linger in the garden, desolate and alone, listening for the sounds of our own names, spoken in love. The question is not, “Why should people in general believe?” but rather, “Why do *you* believe? How has the risen Christ revealed himself *to you*?”

Friends, when I’m able to shift to this lens, out of perfection, I can look around my messy home and see that is what new life brings. A messy home is what free play means for life with small children. It’s not going to be neat and clean and if it is, it won’t stay that way for long. I might not be providing super nutritious meals for my kids these days but they are fed and happy. They are safe and loved. And even when my own patience wanes, other people take them from me so that I’m allowed to be human. New life comes in the midst of mess, of pain, while laboring and in the midst of what has died. New things rise up. We cannot always explain it, but we can choose to see it. Messy resurrection. How has the risen Christ revealed himself to you this day?

Because friends, even in the dark, in the darkness of that tomb, God was and is making all things new. Not clean, not perfect, not without mistakes, but God makes things new. And today, we proclaim that truth with joy because it is good news! “Sometimes just showing up, burial spices in hand, is all it takes to witness a miracle.” (Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*).

So, Church, on this Easter morning, come as you are. I’m not going to clean up Jesus today so that you all will be more impressed with him. Because the God of Easter, the God who brings life out of death does not want to make us more impressive. God is not trying to spiffy us up or spiffy up Jesus so he looks like a sparkly Savior. Christ comes back to us looking like the gardener, with dirt under his nails, and appears to a woman with tears streaming down her face, who accuses him of being a thief. And *she* will be the one who is the first to proclaim that Jesus is alive. God is not about making us nice. God is about making us new. And new does not always look perfect with a fabulous new outfit ... as the Easter story shows us, new can be messy. It just depends on how we choose to see that mess today.

Siblings in Christ, this is the God of this Easter morning. It’s a messy resurrection, but it is resurrection! This is a God who rises to new life with dirt still under God’s nails. New life has come. Death does not have the final word. Life and love do, and it lives on in you. And so, just as we are, spiffy or messy, may you believe the good news for you this day and every day. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.