

Easter sunrise (1Apr18) John 20:1-18

Beginning in the graveyard, we confront the void of death.

Though we may go for the memories—even calling ours here a “memorial” garden—still what we remember highlights what is lacking, the loss, people no longer with us.

As we began this morning, you may have been surrounded by names of those you had known and had loved. Or those markers of concluded lifespans may have called to mind other deaths, the absence and loss of people you are having to live without, the vacancy and emptiness it leaves, holes in your life that should rightly be filled by the presence of those you miss.

Early on Easter morning, that memorial garden is the right setting for us. It is where our story begins. I’ll say it again, because it contradicts normal understanding: our story does not end in a graveyard. We begin there.

This morning’s graveyard gathering did start in the usual way. A woman went to grieve, to mourn the worst as best she could, to deal with death, to confront loss and her sorrow. Mary Magdalene went to weep at the tomb of Jesus.

But instead of only looking back to recall the memories, instead of finding a hollow way forward without this dear one, instead of abysmal endings—instead Mary is confronted with presence, with a new hour of beginnings, with much more to come. Mary thought she would find nobody. But then—after she found no...body—then somebody found her. Jesus. Presence filled the location of lack. Death’s place had been displaced and transformed into life.

We might not have mistaken a memorial gardener this morning to be revealed as Jesus himself, but we did encounter that promise. Like Mary met by Jesus, we’re reminded those gravestones are not for weeping and wailing only but also stones that will cry out Alleluias, not only looking back but looking ahead, the transformation of joy, love coming again, rising to encounter Jesus amid the community of all the saints. That hope joins us in the joyful refrain:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In a variation of that same sense, we arrived into this space with an echo of an Easter evening encounter at Emmaus (Luke 24). Followers of Jesus were in lamentation, disappointed, not only doubt hounding them but despair as they walked away from Jerusalem, away from their hopes in Jesus, their longing apparently proven worthless.

But their void, too, became filled. As Mary hadn’t, neither did they recognize Jesus. When this compassionate stranger took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, in this ritual, Jesus was made known to them. With the realization of his presence in the meal, he vanished from sight. Still, they found themselves opened to hope and could glimpse the goodness continuing, possibility restored to live again.

So for us this morning, after meeting life in the garden of death, we came in here and were given communion, the breaking of the bread, the presence of Jesus made known among us, showing up in the void, invisibly manifest. Again, maybe just a taste of the fullness, Jesus disappearing before we even knew to recognize he was here, but with the awareness that this practice provides for us, sustains us somehow. That little morsel placing on our lips again the glad refrain:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Beyond that, markers and memorials abound, of life triumphant over death, of love that shall overcome, of Jesus entering our void and drear. He comes in cheery chimes, in the skill of Emily’s fingers, the later blare of brass, in exuberant song bursting from your own lungs, words stifled too long, abounding in Alleluias:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Maybe Jesus finds you through this Easter garden, the death of the cross flowered with bright fragrant new life, greened from roughness of death, our dark and longing Maundy Thursday confessions now only found amid beauty. Maybe all gardens in this season become a sacrament of

the end not being blankness of death's void but the warm touch that calls back to life again, a burnt prairie's blackness to health, the surprise of sprouts, the budding beauty, seeming more with each moment of spring days to shout:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

More subdued but one of my favorite symbols of life shared and spreading is this paschal candle. A 1600 year old chant about this Easter candle marks the miracle that its "brightness is not diminished even when its light is divided and borrowed" for baptismal candles and lit again at funerals, shining reminders that Easter isn't Jesus only as resurrected Lord but as resurrecting Lord. He shared our death so we may share his life. There is real consequence for us, too, in proclaiming:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

You may be brought out of the void of meaninglessness and fear by passion that strives ahead. We use the term passion for fierce commitments, driving determination. More, the passion of Jesus that led to his death fills you also with his Spirit. So even when sadness and obstacles would stand in the way, in his resurrection Jesus inspires you for his loving purpose to live on.

To help our understandings of Jesus through this Holy Week, we have been hearing again from Martin Luther King. This week is the 50th anniversary of his assassination, a death because of his passion to stand up for humanity—against racism, poverty, war, and more. In his final words the night before he was shot, Martin Luther King happened to say:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. I may not get there with you. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any [one]. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

And that's what we believe, too, as we share this work, this ministry, this vocation of living God's

will. We are part of the community of struggle, of passion for humanity. So even when it's hard and we'd have reason to be fearful, still we may be confident that the Spirit of Jesus lives on with us, and with Martin Luther King, we also can say, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." We also can say:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Or in proliferating examples, maybe today in full feast tables you see Jesus showing up with the embodiment of life that contradicts the void of the graveyard. Or in smiling faces with candy-filled baskets. Or in the pause of a holiday. Or the rising sunshine's warmth. Or in your heart that yearns and hopes and expects there must be something more.

In this new hour that has come to dawn, though there's so much not yet clear early in the morning and early in our understanding, this risen Jesus in disappearing disguises is arriving to find you. Already there's the reverberation of his promise, an abundance of his life taking on flesh in us, unstoppable hints of good news, already and with more to come:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

* April 3, 1968. "I See the Promised Land" in *A Testament of Hope*, p266.