

Easter in the Midst of Good Friday
Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
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Easter 2017
John 20:1-18

This is the most amazing day. It comes every year but that does not make it any less amazing. Easter is both the best day and the hardest day to preach. This year I was going to do something different. We are so happy to have family visiting and I had really wanted to get my Easter sermon done ahead of time—but I just couldn't. I worked on it but I just couldn't write it.

I couldn't write it until we'd been through Good Friday—because this is not just a story about rising. It's a story of dying *and* rising. It's really hard to think about resurrection—it's hard to believe in it—when you're surrounded by the power of death. On Good Friday you really feel the weight of the power of death—hanging there on that cross.

Not just the power of death but all the forces that defy God—because Jesus is much more than one more wrongly executed man. His life's work was to show what God's dream for the world is—a place where all people have what they need, where no one is excluded, where healing happens—where love rules. On that Good Friday cross, that dream has died.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb *when it is still dark*. She's still very much in that Good Friday place. It's Easter but Mary can't see that—because it is still dark.

Maybe your heart is in that place today. You feel the weight of the power of death and all you can see is how strong the forces that defy God are. You've given all the love you have to give—and it doesn't seem to be enough.

In the dark, it's hard to interpret even what you *do* see. Mary sees the body of Jesus is gone, and she is devastated because now, on top of his awful dying, is one more loss—a proper burial. In the darkness of her grief, she even talks to angels without appearing to realize that's what's she done. A moment later, she is face to face with the Risen Jesus and mistakes him for a gardener.

But then Jesus *calls her name*—Mary!—and she can see who is right in front of her. “Rabbouni!—Teacher!”—she cries.

Don't you wish that would happen to you? I do. In those places of darkness—of fear and grief and despair—I want Jesus to make himself really obvious—“hit me over the head, no mistaking him” obvious.

Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, *is* here—and some people get very clear experiences of that. But most of the time, what we do is claim Easter in the middle of Good Friday. That's the reality of being a human being and a Christian. We live in the middle of brokenness—but we trust there is more here. Jesus is here—even though we might be hard-pressed to see him. He's here because God has raised him in a bold audacious statement about what is really going on and where we and this whole world are headed.

Mary Magdalene is the first person to hear and see the Resurrected Jesus. Shortly after that, she becomes an apostle—someone sent out with a message. Jesus sends her with a message for the rest of Jesus’s friends and followers. And what Mary says is: “I have seen the Lord.”

And over time, it becomes a community of people who can say to each other and the world, “I have seen the Lord.”

I was visiting this week with a dear friend and church member, Dean Kelly. During the time that I have known him, Dean has gone from limited vision to being blind. He talked about *seeing* a baseball game the other day. Then, he kind of chuckled and said, “There I am talking about seeing a game. But it’s kind of like that. The other senses get stronger. I can hear so much more now. I can tell from the crack of the bat whether it was a good hit or not.” He told me that in a basketball game, he can hear the swoosh of the net when someone makes a basket—so he knows they’ve scored even before the crowd cheers.

That sound is there for all of us to hear but we don’t hear it-- until we’re in the dark. That’s where we develop our Resurrection sense—where we help each other develop our Resurrection sense. That sense that enables us to see the Risen Jesus—in places and situations where we are expecting to see only the power of death.

Ten years ago, this very morning, a student at Virginia Tech killed 32 teachers and students. This week on Story Corps, Virginia Tech teacher Jane Vance shared about the day after.

“I came into my class of 35, expecting maybe 5 students. But they were all there, still as statues, until Patrick stood up and said, with a wooden cadence, full of kindness: ‘My sister is the worst wounded survivor. She has a bullet next to her spine and another one in her French braid.’

Then Kristin stood up and said: ‘My friend Caitlin was the only other person at this big school from our small town. . .’

Patrick finished her sentence: ‘Yes, Caitlin, she sat next to my sister. She died very quickly.’

‘That’s what I wanted to know.’

The whole class rose spontaneously, hugged each other and then sat down.

‘Is it time for me to teach?’ I asked. They all nodded.

That kindness in such young people changed me forever.”

In a place of horror, 10 years later, what has lasted is *kindness*. That’s seeing the Risen Jesus with us now.

But it’s not just in places of extraordinary horror.

I saw the Risen Jesus in our midst many times over, just in the last few days.

I saw him with an elderly couple, after one of them had received an unexpected diagnosis and gone straight to the hospital from the doctor's office. One is in the hospital bed. One is in the recliner. They spend the day together--sometimes talking, sometimes dozing, sometimes looking over at each other with grateful smiles. The hospital staff treats them like they're on a romantic cruise, bringing food to them both, asking what their secret is for staying married for 59 years.

I saw the Risen Jesus with a young lawyer who joyfully steps up to be a mentor for someone she doesn't know just because she's grateful for someone who helped her.

I saw him again in a woman whose sister died suddenly a few months ago, reach out to another woman whose sister died unexpectedly this week.

And then again, in someone who has a rare medical condition, and who is more concerned about getting scientists to use her as a research subject than about how precarious her life is. That's not what I expected. And that's what it looks like when the Risen Jesus is around.

I saw him again, in the hallway of the Washington Hospital Center. If you've been there, you know there are these blind corners—and they actually have mirrors up so you can see oncoming walkers. As it happened, two people who were being pushed in wheelchairs were headed in opposite directions for the same turn. Usually, two wheelchairs could pass easily if the person pushing each one moves all the way over on their side.

But this was different. The man who was pushing his friend or family member was disabled himself. He was using a cane with one hand, and pushing the woman in the wheelchair with the other. So, in order to steer it, he had to position himself off to the side.

What he was doing was heroic. And I think everyone who saw it had to be jarred out of their world of illness and suffering, and placed on some other plane of wonder at the love and the life that was triumphing at that moment.

The picture of a man with a cane, pushing a woman in a wheelchair is, for me, an image of how we all claim the Resurrection right in the middle of our Good Friday lives—right in the middle of the suffering we can't understand—the suffering that breaks us--but nevertheless the suffering that we love through. Amazing!

Today, in just a few minutes, we, in the midst of our uncertainty and brokenness, will claim the power of the Resurrection for Anita as she comes forward in *her* uncertainty and brokenness. In the waters of Baptism, Anita will be claimed as God's beloved child. Just like Mary, she will hear Jesus call her name. And she will belong to this community—the body of Christ here and throughout the world—and together we will thank God for this most amazing day and say, "We have seen the Lord."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.