

“Whom Are you Looking For?”
John 20:1-18

Last Wednesday on the way back from visiting someone in the hospital in Buffalo, I decided to visit the famous Broadway Market. This is where I learned about the Polish celebration of Dyngus Day which is the day after Easter. It sounds like a wonderful time for celebration of spring and Polish culture. There is a whole brochure explaining the cultural significance of this celebration and inviting the community to celebrate it. I wonder if we were creating a similar brochure about Easter what we would choose to put in it. What do you think?

Of course we would certainly include the story of Jesus and his resurrection. But what we include next is going to be determined by whether we want to give people our understanding and beliefs about the resurrection or whether we want to invite them to join us in the resurrected life of Christ. Is Easter just another belief or practice that we need to explain or is it a way of life for us that we need to invite others to?

It is interesting to remember that the early Christians had a variety of understandings of the resurrection. Some believed that the resurrection of the body of Jesus was not just a passing into the next life, but that Jesus returned to earth with his physical body. Resurrection for people at that time meant that someone would go back to their body and to this life. Some Christians saw the resurrection of Jesus not as a physical event. In 1 Corinthians 15:12 Paul was writing to the church in Corinth where evidently, there were some people who did not believe in the resurrection of the body. But what most Christians held in common after the resurrection is their excitement about following the way of Christ. What they discovered in the story of Christ in his teachings, death, and resurrection a story that continues on. It is an ongoing story. The resurrection was their reminder of that.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, it was hard for his followers to know what to do. They seemed to have lost their hope. In fact, in our Bible story for today from the Gospel of John we see Mary Magdalene going to the tomb to mourn. But even after she and some of the other disciples did not find the body of Jesus there, she was not expecting to see Jesus at all. She thought that he was the gardener. All of this was because she was in such mourning and pain. Even though in that culture the appearance of the dead was to be expected for the first 40 days after death, Mary who was one of the close disciples of Jesus, somehow did not recognize that possibility. Even after she saw the angels in the tomb, she still was not expecting anything beyond that. What she was expecting was that somebody had stolen the body of Jesus. That expectation limited her ability to recognize Jesus when she saw him in person.

Yet the witness of Mary Magdalene became the foundation of hope for the disciples. It is interesting to see that the good news of the resurrection was entrusted to a woman. Given the status of women in those days, it is amazing that the other two disciples who were male did not see Jesus first. She was the one entrusted with this vision. The great act of God's love was revealed to a lowly person in society. This is very consistent with the ministry of Jesus which lifted up those who were on the bottom of society. This was the power of the resurrection. In a book called, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the death and life of Jesus*, S. J. Patterson notes that, "The resurrection is unequivocally Jesus' resurrection for us. This is because most of us do not really believe in resurrection from the dead, except, of course, in the case of Jesus. He is in a class by himself. For ancients, resurrection is quite possible... The hard part would have been believing that Jesus, a nobody, had been raised from the dead..." This is what gave hope to the early Christian movement. They did not need to see everything fixed in the world before

they joined the mission of Jesus. What they saw in his resurrection was that evil did not have the final word and that the mission of Jesus was continuing.

So, if we were to write a brochure about the resurrection to give to others, I would say the key to it is the hope that Easter gives to us about God's continued mission in the world. The work of Christ is continuing in our world today. The resurrection of Jesus was part of God's continued work of bringing renewal to our world. Resurrection is not about waiting for God to save the world. It is about our call to partner with God in the work of hope and compassion. The resurrection is not only about life after death. It is about the work of God in transforming our world right here and right now. It is a call to hope and action. In his book, *The Meaning of Jesus*, biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes that what the early Christians and the New Testament writers understood about the resurrection being about receiving a treasure in heaven was very different from what we understand. "The point of such passages, as in 1 Peter 1:4, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Philippians 3:20, and so forth, is not that one must 'go to heaven', as in much-popular imagination, in order to enjoy the inheritance there. It is rather that 'heaven' is the place where God stores up [God's] plans and purposes for the future. If I tell a friend that there is beer in the fridge, that doesn't mean he has to get into the fridge in order to enjoy the beer. When the early Christians speak of a new body in heaven, or an inheritance in heaven, they mean what St John the Divine means in Revelation 21: the new identity which at present is kept safe in heaven will be brought from heaven to earth at the great moment of renewal. Yes: the great majority of Christian expressions of hope through the middle ages, the reformation, and the counter-reformation periods have been misleading. 'Heaven' is not the Christian's ultimate destination. For renewed bodies we need a renewed cosmos, including a renewed earth. That is what the New Testament promises." The mystery of the resurrection of Jesus is an invitation for all of us who follow Christ today to continue his work of justice, love, transformation and compassion in the world. It does not matter if we use the best theological concepts or language to describe the resurrection if we don't practice it in our lives.

Peter Rollins, author of *The Orthodox Heretic*, has this to say about 'the' resurrection: "Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think... I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed."

Easter is about the hope God has for our world and for us to continue the work of Christ in our lives, our communities and our world. The story is told about a school teacher who accepted the volunteer position of visiting and teaching children who were inpatients in a large city hospital. She was retired and decided that this was what she could do in her retirement. One day the phone rang and she received her first assignment as a new volunteer. The teacher on the other end of the line was the classroom teacher of a young boy who had been hospitalized and needed tutoring during his stay in the hospital. It was not until the visiting teacher got just outside the boy's hospital room that she realized he was a patient in the hospital's BURN UNIT. She was prepared to teach English Grammar, but she was not prepared to witness the horrible look and smell of badly burned human flesh. Everything around her made her want to hold her nose, to turn around and to leave faster than she came. But something inside her kept her from

walking away, so she clumsily stammered over to his bedside and said simply, "I'm the hospital teacher and your teacher sent me to help you with your nouns and adverbs," and she began to teach. The next morning when she came to work a nurse from the burn unit rushed up to her and asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher began to apologize, but before she could finish, the nurse interrupted her. "You don't understand. We've been really worried about him and his condition has been getting worse over the past few days, because he had completely given up hope. But ever since you were here with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed and he's responding to treatment—It's as though he decided to live! What did you do?" When the nurse later questioned the little boy he said, "I figured I was doomed . . . that I was gonna die . . . until I saw that teacher . . ." And as a tear began to run down his little face, he finished: "But when I saw that teacher, I realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy . . . would they?"

This is the hope of Easter! The story of God's love is not finished yet! This is the hope which Mary Magdalene and the other disciples received in their experience of the empty tomb. Each one of us here is invited not just to get or give information about the great story of the resurrection of Christ. Each one of us is called to practice resurrection every day of our lives. Our lives and our commitments are the best brochure that we can ever give to others about the hope of the resurrection. Amen.