

Easter, Year B
Mark 16: 1-8
April 12, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

What Are We To Make Of It?
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Flowers bursting forth. Folks dressed up in all their finery. The familiar strains of Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Champagne and Easter eggs awaiting us. The words –“He has been raised.” And then, and then the end of the Easter story we hear today—“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The discordance of it all. New life. Joy. Celebration abounding. And at the end—terror, amazement and silence.

What are we to make of it all? How do we hold such contradictory images and feelings together? The temptation is to choose one and reject the other. To clean things up. To resolve the contradictions by turning a blind eye to one side of the equation or other. To fiddle with the story making it fit, making it neat. That’s what folks have been doing for years, centuries, millennia even.

But life and death are not that neat. And that’s the beauty and the hope of this Easter story. On the one hand the promise that life trumps death, the conviction that those who flaunt their power and oppress the powerless do not have the final word, the hope that the one who has promised to be with us until the end of the age has already gone before us to Galilee. And on the other hand the fear, the terror, the amazement and the silence.

With no lilies perfuming their way, with no alleluias ringing in their ears, the women make their way to the tomb. Three women—forsaken, weary, afraid, forlorn—all that’s left of Jesus’ band of disciples. Their hearts wintry from the grief they feel, the loss they have endured. No wonder they focus on the stone. It distracts them from what lies ahead.

How stunned they must have been when they saw the stone was gone. The hair on their arms standing straight with fear. Do you think they even heard the stranger say, “Do not be alarmed”? Of course they were alarmed. The one who loved them in a way they had never before experienced had been brutally killed and now his body had disappeared. Every certainty had been stripped from them. Who among us would not have been alarmed? Who among us would not have been afraid?

Half hearing his next words, “He has been raised; he is not here....Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee,” they flee from the tomb “for terror and amazement had seized them.”

No wonder they are filled with fear. No wonder they flee from the tomb. No wonder they keep silent. This is strange and startling news indeed. Their world has been turned upside down yet again. The one whom they seek is not sealed in a tomb but risen and ready to meet them in the midst of the messiness of life. Hard to believe. Hard to absorb. Hard to imagine. Hard for their wintry hearts to take in.

In this most unusual Easter story there lies a core of truth that resonates with me and perhaps with you as well. It takes time for wintry hearts to absorb good news. It takes time for green blades of hope to rise in human hearts. It takes time to live into a new reality.

I remember so well the times in my life when it has been hard to even hear good news. Perhaps you know those times as well—times of deep grief or deep loss, times when you walk around in a daze, not even sure how you are attending to your daily needs. Times when your heart is numb. Going through the motions kinds of times. Times when the possibility of a new job, the thought that you might laugh again or the notion that the pain will ever go away seem totally unreal—so unreal that you don't even hear good news when it's proffered to you.

Even when those green blades of hope begin to rise in human hearts, it can be hard to see them. We get so used to the numbness or the pain or the sheer dreariness of it all that we don't see new life springing up around us. A few months after my mother died, a friend wrote, "Be on the watch for new life. It is springing up all around you." He was encouraging me to look out at life through Easter eyes. But it takes time to learn to see with Easter eyes.

And it takes time to live into the Easter world.

Not long ago, I read a story about a man who had been crippled since childhood. An operation made it possible for him to walk without limping. He commented that the hard part was not learning how to walk without limping. The hard part was learning how to live as a person without a handicap. He had to change his whole way of thinking about himself and the world around him.

Bishop Gene Robinson made a similar observation not long after he returned to work after having been treated for alcoholism. He said that "abstaining from alcohol was the easy part of treatment; learning to live a truly sober and conscious life...was the really difficult goal."¹

Both men learning to live into the Easters of their lives.

The poet Gerald Manly Hopkins once wrote,
Let God Easter in us
be a dayspring to the dimness of us....

It takes time for God to Easter in us.

But one day, we will look up and see the green blade rising.
We'll meet Jesus in Galilee.
We'll hear him say, "Follow me."

"Follow me," in the work of healing those who are in pain, reaching out to those others overlook, feeding the hungry, and repairing the breeches of our lives. And as we do—as we follow him—God will be Eastering in us.

Let the alleluias resound as with our lives we proclaim, "Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed."
Alleluia. Alleluia.

¹ V. Gene Robinson, "The Missing Stone and the Empty Cross," *Witness Magazine*, April 11, 2006. <http://www.thewitness.org/printArticle.php?id=1052>.