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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

John 20:1-18; Psalm 118

17 April 2022

Easter/Resurrection Sunday: From Certainty to Openness

*Opening Greeting/Prayer:*

Please join me in prayer. God of open arms and open hands, you have offered each of us relationship with you, relationship that draws us to the core of who we are as bearers of your image in your created universe. With your Holy Spirit filling us each day, may each new breath open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the kingdom possibilities made real and vindicated in Jesus' resurrection. In the name of our resurrected Messiah Jesus. Amen.

*Message:*

In these last 7 weeks of lent, our themes have been seemingly opposing realities: in seeking God's ways, we move from security to generosity; from fear to compassion; from earning to receiving; from exceptionalism to inclusion; from scarcity to abundance; and from power over to power with. What seems to be happening each Sunday as we explore scriptures, sing songs, and share stories together is that we transition from our certainty to supposedly God's certainty. But this should give us pause, thinking that we may have God's way figured out, as though the complexities of each of our lives can be this simple. Today's movement from certainty to openness offers us some wisdom for the way forward, always seeking and listening.

So, one bit of wisdom might be that we embrace the both/and of each of our themes rather than the false dichotomy or the either/or that has been our normal language throughout

Lent. Somehow in the midst of our journeys together with Jesus and our siblings in God's renewed family, we seek both security and generosity; both fear and compassion; both earning and receiving; both exceptionalism and inclusion, both scarcity and abundance; both power over and power with. What you might be noticing then is that each theme is a kind of paradox, that we are doing our best to hold the tension between what seem to be opposing forces. Even in today's theme, we hold some certainty about who we are, why we're here, and what God is calling us to, while realizing that we do not have it all right. I hold what is important to me with open hands, seeking the way of Jesus in each moment as I am transformed by each new breath of the Spirit.

So, how does paradox meet up with our story in John 20, then? Let's look at a few seemingly certainties of the first century. Resurrection as a possible fate for those who died was not something new in that time period. The Sadducees, a Jewish sect that controlled the power of Jerusalem did not believe in resurrection, while the Pharisees, another Jewish sect that we hear about much more often throughout Jesus ministry, believed that resurrection would happen at the final judgment. Remember too that while the Hebrew scriptures have stories about someone not passing away such as Enoch in Genesis or Elijah in 1 Kings, 99.9% of people who did pass away did not come back so it was a safe assumption that once someone died, they were going to stay dead. Being visited by angels, having a vision, even miraculous resuscitation that later ended in death, were much more common experiences in the Hebrew scriptures than resurrection.

So then, holding all of these swirling ideas of paradox and resurrection, let's look at this morning's story. Like close relatives that come to their loved one's gravesite, Mary Magdalene comes the day after Sabbath to visit Jesus's tomb and grieve. To her great surprise, the large stone that was sitting in front of the entrance has been moved aside, leaving the body of Jesus at risk to any number of desecrating acts such as someone stealing anything that had been laid in

the tomb with him; someone taking the body itself; or scavenging animals feeding on his body just to name a few. According to Luke's gospel, Mary has been following Jesus since he had freed her from seven demons. She appears, first, in John at the foot of Jesus's cross. After finding Jesus's body gone, she runs back to tell Peter and the beloved disciple what has happened. Notice her certainty that Jesus's body has been stolen. Peter and the other disciple need to see it for themselves so they run to the tomb. The beloved disciple seems to understand something more than a body-snatching has happened because the text says that he saw the empty tomb and believed, yet he and Peter still do not fully understand what has happened.

Both the disciples go home, while Mary stays and weeps in her dear loved one's absence, bewildered and wondering. The stone in front of the tomb was huge, and it had only been a couple of days. As tears stream down her cheeks, she looks again into the tomb and is startled again by two angels sitting where Jesus body was supposed to be. They ask her about her tears, and she repeats what she told the two disciples. At this point, I wonder if she notices someone in the corner of her eye and turns to look, incredulous that someone again is asking her the reason for her tears. Her exasperation and desperation come through: "If you did this, please... please... please just tell me where the body is, and I will take it and give it a proper burial." The gardener responds by saying her name, "Mary." I can see her wipe away the tears from her eyes so that she can focus. She turns fully to look at the mysterious gardener who seems to know her, and she realizes. "Teacher," she says and she clings to his legs, to his hand, to anything that will reassure her that he is really here. Jesus tells her to let go, not because he is cold and distant, lacking compassion, but because he has a mission for her, a message that she will carry not only to the disciples but to everyone for the rest of her life. The first evangelist and apostle of the resurrected Jesus, at least in John's gospel, is a woman, one of the least believable witnesses of the Roman

world. Like the disgraced, unnamed Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Mary gets the privilege of sharing how Jesus has called her and how new life has been proven in the right.

Note though that it takes 3 times before Mary is woken up from her sleepy certainty by the sound of her beloved teacher's voice. Mary cannot see past her tears or her certainty long enough to realize that Jesus is standing at the tomb with her. Her heart opens at the sound of her name, and the whole world changes. The resurrected Jesus is here; she has seen, heard, and touched him, not a ghost or a spirit or a phantom or a zombie for that matter. Jesus has a body, somewhat different yet somewhat the same as what he had been, another example of the both/and. Mary now has to reconcile the certainty of life with death with the reality of Jesus's resurrected body. Suddenly new possibilities arise with the truth of new life in resurrection, possibilities that Mary and us would have never considered. So then, we return to our Lenten themes, being open to the possibility of how the resurrected Jesus transforms our certainty into openness.

Maybe the best way that I can say it succinctly is that in light of the possibilities that resurrection opens for us, we walk in its power, seeking God's way of both security and generosity, of fear and compassion, of earning and receiving, of exceptionalism and inclusion, of scarcity and abundance, and of both power over and power with. As you begin to open yourself more and more to God's calling and working in your life, will you share, as Mary did, about how you have experienced the risen Jesus and it has changed everything for you?

*Closing Prayer:* Creating God, redeeming God, sustaining God, you are always on the cusp of creating new heavens, new earth. The twists and turns of life, the resurrection from death, the power of love to find a path in the wilderness – all astound and confound us. We stand wet-eyed

with open mouths before the tomb. The stone has been rolled away, and we peer into darkness as your voice calls from behind. You know our names. You are a new being, you are compassion, and you are release, urging us not to hold on to you but to join in your movement. May we move so that our lives become new, the circle of our care expands and connects, our openness clearly declares, "We have seen the Lord." On this day of Resurrection, we praise you for your renewing promise and power in resurrection. In Jesus' name. Amen.