

Seeing and smelling the beautiful flowers in our sanctuary this morning is, for me, one of the integral components of Easter Sunday worship. Living as we do, in an uncertain climate when it comes to spring, these flowers bring spring to us and speak of hope and life. No wonder they are for us this morning so symbolic of Easter and resurrection.

Maybe it's because we live in an area where plants have a limited time to flourish outside that many of us keep indoor houseplants. My home has a sunroom, and I carefully tend maybe a dozen plants of all shapes and sizes there, to give my spirit a lift when the outside world seems stuck in a mode of brown grass and gray skies. Many of these plants have a long history with me, and I'm quite fond of them. One such plant was a peace lily; I treasured it, because it had been given to me by a dear friend some years earlier. And so I was distressed when we returned from a vacation one time to discover that the plant had been overlooked by the person we had coming in to tend to our pets and plants in our absence. The plant did not look good when we first returned. It was wilted, lifeless and pretty pathetic. In fact, I was going to throw it away, so I could put it out of its misery. But my husband, Phil, with that foolish optimism which characterizes many faithful people, urged me to give it one last chance. So I did.

And, reluctant though I am to admit it, my husband was right. The plant made a dramatic and full recovery and even sent forth some blooms that same year. It was like a little domestic parable about resurrection from death to life. Had Phil been an average kind of guy, he would have said, "I told you so!" But being a pastor and a theologian he instead said to me: "We always underestimate the power of resurrection." Wise words and timely for our consideration this Easter morning.

You and I *always* underestimate the power of resurrection. We underestimate the power of *God*. We take the lifeless at face value and do not see the deeply buried pulse of life within. The discouragements, the hostility, and the sadness of our world overwhelm us. We accept them as the norm. We expect the dead to remain dead—which puts us right into the shoes of the women in our gospel lesson this morning.

We read in Luke that the women came at early dawn to the tomb of Christ, bringing with them spices. If we here *this* morning are surrounded by the scent of flowers, *they* were accompanied on *their* early morning journey by the pungent scent of myrrh and other spices. These women are eventually identified in the lesson as being Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other unnamed women. And *why* were these women going to the tomb with their spices and so early in the morning? It was to anoint the body of Christ. Because he had died on the evening of the Sabbath, they had been unable to perform this humble but loving duty at that time. They waited until the Sabbath was over and then came, first thing, on that Sunday to accomplish this task. They were determined to perform this final act of love and respect for their Lord, now dead. They had no other expectation whatsoever. They *knew* the dead stayed dead. Always had, always would. No crazy hopes or foolish faith led them to believe otherwise. Which is how they are like us, also disillusioned, disheartened, and looking for the dead to remain dead. And that's also why they were so completely undone by what they actually found on that morning.

They first found the huge stone closing the tomb had been rolled away. That must have both disturbed them and pleased them. It was a heavy stone; it would have been extremely hard work for them to roll it away themselves. Yet, why wasn't it where it should be? One wonders what they expected to find as they entered that mysteriously opened tomb. Other mourners? Grave robbers? Roman soldiers making a mockery of Jesus' body? Whatever they expected to find, they did expect to find *something*. So, when they instead found *nothing*, they were utterly baffled. The body wasn't there. No one was there. The tomb was empty. It just didn't make sense. Tombs don't empty themselves out. The dead remain dead. What on earth was going on? In the understated words of our text, the women were "perplexed." And why not?

As it happens, they don't remain alone in the tomb for long, because there is yet another surprise in store for them. We read, "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them." We are able to discern that these "two men" were angels-- both by the description of their sudden and dazzling appearance, and by the reaction of the women. Because Mary Magdalene and the other women were overcome by terror and bowed

their faces to the ground. They weren't encountering Roman soldiers or grave robbers or even well-dressed fellow believers; they were encountering the Holy, and it terrified them.

The angel's words to them were memorable and enigmatic: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Kind of an unfair question, wasn't it? These women *weren't* seeking the living at all. They were seeking *the dead* among the dead. They had no foolish faith that suggested to them they would discover life at all. Of course, they were looking for the dead Jesus in his tomb. Where *else* would they look for him? Just like all the rest of Jesus' followers, and just like us, they underestimated the power of resurrection. They underestimated the power of God.

It's significant to recognize the varied kind of reactions of those in our text to this empty tomb. It's significant, because we also have various reactions to this Easter event, ranging from hope to doubt to belief to skepticism and more. This makes us no different than the first ones to encounter the empty tomb in our text this morning. How about the women? Do we read anything about a sudden conversion to faith? Nope. Do we read anything about being filled with joy? Not at all. Here is what we read---"having been reminded by the angels that Christ had told them he would die and be raised, the women remembered this to be true." That's all the reaction we hear about. They *remembered*. Suddenly Jesus' earlier words about dying and rising ring true to them now. Although we read *nothing* about joy or dramatic confessions of faith, they are now sufficiently motivated to go and tell what had happened to the 11 remaining disciples and to other followers of Jesus. All right; so how do these *others* respond to news of the empty tomb? With dramatic confessions of faith or joyful hearts? Again, not at all. We read, "their words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them." These others respond with skepticism and disbelief, and understandably so. But we'd have to honestly acknowledge that so far, the resurrection isn't having quite the impact one might expect. We do learn that Peter was at least intrigued enough to go and run up to the tomb himself to check things out. He discovers, as the women had told him, that the tomb is in fact quite empty of Jesus' body, and that the grave linen cloths are all that remain. We are told that he went home, "amazed" at this. Amazed, yes---but again, no mention of faith or of joy. So throughout this account, some "remember", some dismiss the story, one is "amazed"; but we are not

told that any of them immediately embraced or claimed a resurrection faith. We know that this *will* happen, because they are the first witnesses who began to spread the faith, and we are only here this morning, across the world and 2000 years later, because they did so. But, it will take a little time and a few more appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, before the reality of resurrection really takes hold. Belief and faith may take time, even in the face of the miraculous, which may give the skeptical among us some comfort. If you aren't sure how to respond to the empty tomb, you're in excellent company with the first witnesses, Christians throughout the centuries, and your fellow-worshipers here this morning. *All* of us struggle to make sense of that empty tomb. It's not a litmus test of our faith, it's just a testimony to our being human and to the extraordinary nature of the Easter event. Because we all, just like the earliest witnesses, underestimate the power of resurrection. We underestimate the power of God.

To be fair to us, it's not really surprising that we expect the dead to remain dead. Life has a way of wearying our hearts and diminishing our hopes and corroding our faith. Bad news seems to surround us wherever we look in the world. We look in our own mirror and discover we are aging and are not growing up to be the person we thought we would be. We see brokenness in our relationships; brokenness in ourselves. We easily relate to the reactions we read about in the gospel lesson today. Like them, we may face this Easter, this resurrection day, by feeling perplexed. Or by remembering the story but not embracing it. Or by being intrigued and amazed by the event but not internalizing it.

Wherever we are at in our faith journey, however we face this empty tomb, we belong here this morning. We are practicing our faith, whether brimming with certainties or brimming with questions and doubt. Here, in front the empty tomb, is where we belong. What we can recognize, wherever we are at personally, is that Easter means that nothing is the same. If the resurrection is true; if God has power even over death; if God gives us that same victory over death out of a love that cannot be altered even by the very worst of us;---if all that is so, then we live in a world brimming with possibilities and hope. That would mean that death is not the end of our story, but resurrection. And surely the God who brings the dead to life, can also bring life into the little deaths *we* experience every day. The deaths of hope, of faith, of relationship, of dreams---could it

be that resurrection is possible even in these things? Could it be that second chances are actually handed out in abundance? Could it be that in spite of the weight of sin and evil, goodness and mercy actually have the final word? Could it be that new opportunities come all the time, even to us jaded and fearful as we are?

How can you and I embrace the resurrection of Christ? How do we move from being perplexed or amazed or simply being reminded of the event of resurrection, to actually experiencing faith? Maybe that depends on how we understand faith. Will we always be absolutely 100% certain that there is a God, that Christ is raised, that resurrection happens? Of course not! But, what if we hope it's true, and what if we catch a glimmer of that reality from time to time, and what if we act on the assumption that it is so? What if we put our trust in God and we take that leap of faith and live as though God has defeated evil and life has the final word over death? Wouldn't that, in fact, *be* faith? Isn't that, in fact, what faith *is*—trusting in the goodness of God even when other factors would seem to argue against that? Maybe we're not so far from faith as we might sometimes think. Maybe we *are* Easter people. Those who trust that God is good and life has the final word over death.

This Easter morning, our Gospel lesson invites us to take that leap of faith. Look for indications that God is good. Look for signs of resurrection. Look for new life, outside of yourself and within yourself. Look for indications that God is alive, active, and powerful. Look for signs of resurrection. Look for these signs as you worship and when you receive Holy Communion. Or in the lighting of our beautiful new Paschal candle or the receiving of new members. Look for these indications of the power of resurrection as robins return, or as we act out of love or witness the kindness of others, or as we recognize that the Christian faith and church continue to thrive 2000 years after the resurrection event. We can experience the Risen Lord.

Today is Easter: do not underestimate the power of resurrection. Do not underestimate the power of God. Recognize that our usual expectations of death and doom can be completely wrong. Instead, look for God to be God: to bring life from death, to make all things new, to bring hope that triumphs over despair. Christ is risen and he is risen for you. Amen.