

Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

Resurrection from Our Empty Tomb

O God, who turns the shadow of death into dawn; open our eyes to see your presence. Open our ears, to know your voice, open our hearts to fill us with your fire, Amen.

Welcome happy morning age to age shall say, and welcome to you as we join in celebration of the resurrection of our Lord. Easter is a popular occasion in the church because the music is festive, the mood is jubilant, and the news is good. If you've been paying attention to the world around us, it is little wonder that we need some good news. But before we can fully embrace what this day means, we must travel the paths of our ancestors who stood in the darkness of the tomb. "Alleluia Christ is risen" was not their first response to a barren grave. Fear and confusion added to the despair of that disorienting scene. In the shadows of death, who would believe that there could be the possibility of new life?

In the gospel this morning, Mary was a faithful follower who stayed with Jesus to the bitter end. The death of her Lord signaled the death of hope among her people. Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark. Her heart broken, she must have been seeking some sort of peace from the horror that had taken place. When Mary saw that the stone had been rolled away, she assumed the worst. His body had been stolen and she did not know where to find him. The emptiness was unbearable and Mary stood terrified in the dark. Only when Jesus called Mary by name did she recognize his presence. It was Mary's movement from grief to joy, that signaled her own resurrection.

The events we observe during Holy Week are meant to place us squarely in the midst of darkness. We begin the journey waving our palms and shouting, "Hosanna in the highest!" and in the very same breath, our shouts become, "Crucify him!" We share in the last supper and commemorate Jesus' washing of the disciples feet, just before they betrayed him. We strip the altar to signify how Jesus was stripped of his freedom and dignity. We walk the way of the cross witnessing the horror of crucifixion, and wait with Mary at death's door. From the depths of that vantage point perhaps our own need for resurrection comes to mind. Yet truth be told, the resurrection story is the most difficult to believe. When we say Christ is risen, it is not just an affirmation of belief, but an attitude of the heart.

Last summer a small group of missionaries from Holy Cross embarked upon a journey to Tanzania to work with our partners at the Buguruni Anglican Health Centre. Though few of us were qualified to provide any medical care, we had the opportunity to accompany a community health worker into the bowels of the poorest neighborhoods of Dar es Salaam. Delivering food and medicine to those in remote locations or unable to travel, we were invited into homes made of stone and mud. We were greeted with smiles and always offered the best rug or seat they had.

One visit stood out because it looked like a small cave or tomb we were entering. I felt hesitant about what we would find in that dark, damp place, but the woman we visited reached out her hands in welcome. So thankful for our company and our aid, she smiled and gestured for us to sit beside her. As part of the health visit, the worker took pictures to share with the medical staff. When we took pictures on our phones, she inspected them carefully and giggled at her own

image. The life I found in that tomb was most remarkable and unexpected. Her joy against all odds, made me wonder about the source of her hope.

In a book entitled, *The Book of Joy, Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama dialogue about finding joy in the midst of suffering. Both of these spiritual heroes who have stared into the abyss of adversity, discovered ways to find joy despite their circumstance. Common practices anchor their spiritual lives and offer possibilities and hope.

These pillars of joy, as they have named them, are qualities of the mind and of the heart. As I reflect upon Mary in the tomb and the woman in Tanzania, four of these pillars they shared in common; perspective, humility, compassion and gratitude. When Jesus called to Mary in that dark tomb, suddenly a barren grave had new meaning. The simple rice and oil we brought to the village, for one with few resources were riches indeed. Perspective helps us see the possibilities.

When our lives have been stripped bare and we encounter our own empty tombs, humility makes us ready to receive resurrection. Suffering deepens our capacity for compassion as our focus shifts from self to other. When new life emerges from those dark places, our gratitude is a source of hope for others.

On this day, the resurrection power of Jesus is offered to all, so that we may see the possibilities in all people and circumstances around us. With this power we are equipped to be an Easter people in a Good Friday world. As we leave here, I hope you feel joy, but I also hope you remember your empty tomb and the ways Christ has so lovingly resurrected you to new perspective, new humility, compassion and gratitude. This can be the hope someone else needs. Then with our minds and our hearts we can shout, Alleluia Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed, Amen.