

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
April 4th, 2021
John 20 and Acts 10

I was reminded recently of the Backyardigan phase of family life. Alaina, our office administrator, had her daughter here one day. She was watching the Backyardigans in a Cinderella dress. It was a little *deja-vu*.

When Abby was little, she loved to watch the Backyardigans. A show about a group of cartoon characters who would go into their backyards and imagine this elaborate world of play that they would then enter for the next half hour. The backyard would turn into the wild west, or the mission to Mars, or the world of the Samurai, or some other imagined world. Like a Broadway musical, they would sing and dance their way through it only to emerge at the end of the half-hour, the conflict resolved, the backyard returned to normal, and they on their way in for a snack. Abby watched them over and over. She knew every episode by heart. If you wanted to know what was going to happen or what it was about, she could tell you. But, if you watched her watch them, you'd bet it was the first time, the first encounter. She was fascinated, excited, surprised, humored. She got nervous at the right places, felt suspense at the right places, laughed at the right places. Even though she knew what was coming, it only enlivened her more.

Watching a kid watch the same show over and over fully engaged suggests to me how we might read our Easter story. Furthermore, there are some movies, or some books, that we repeatedly watch or read because I suspect we want to reproduce the effect it has on us. For Abby in these last several years it has been Harry Potter as well as the Land of Stories series. For me it is "A River Runs Through it." Maybe you have a favorite. But my point is when we are enlivened or awakened by a story, we might be inclined to return to it. But the problem is, over time, it starts to lose its effect. It grows flat. We anticipate what is coming; it doesn't have the same effect. We don't laugh when we are supposed to laugh, we don't get anxious when those suspenseful moments come, we don't cry when we are supposed to cry.

I wonder if the same risk is true of our Easter story. We have heard it so many times that we either accept it whole cloth or we reject it. We have heard it so often that we tend to go straight to what it means, not bothering with the story's drama.

Now Friday night, there were a number of us here together. We dressed in black with white accents. We told the story of the upper room and the broken bread and

poured cup, we went to the garden, and we listened through the extended story of how Jesus was eventually hoisted on a cross. We didn't try to make meaning of it just yet. And I suggested, that like when a friend invites us to listen to what they have gone through, that this is what Jesus invites us to. Jesus invites us to eat with him, to pray in the garden with him, and to bear witness to what he endured, and to recognize that it was for us. And when you tell a friend a story of what you have been through, you don't want them to make it better or make meaning for you. You want them to listen. You want them to bear witness to what is true.

You see, there is something to be gained by entering the story again. It's why you still agonizingly watch the Broncos play, when you could just look up the score after the game to find out how much they lost by. It's not just about the final score, is it? We might feel the impact of Sunday morning more if we walk with his followers through those dark disorienting events. And in reality, friends, we each have had dark disorienting times. Haven't we? You see what Jesus took on on Good Friday was not foreign. It was the common stuff of our stories, the brokenness, and the sin of our human lives. The dark nights. The betrayals, the disorientation, the lostness, the dejectedness of hopes dashed. That is what he took on. He took on the experiences that we don't know fully, but we know something of. He took on the condition that all these experiences are symptoms of.

In our gospel reading, Mary is feeling in her body and in her emotions what you might have felt at one time or another. She is gripped with this absence, is she not? It is not an idea. It has taken over her body, her emotions, her being. And while Peter and John have come and gone with all their running, while they have retreated to make sense of it all, Mary stays there in the place of absence, with all its intensity.

Now, as I suggested a moment ago, one reason we return to a story is because we identify with it. We connect with the experiences or the emotion, or it intrigues us. So, I wonder if you can identify with Mary at all. Now, I realize I am asking you to do something that we don't always do on Easter morning. I am asking you to bear witness with Mary and to identify with that embodied place of desperation and grief, of hope and longing.

On Easter, we tend to go straight to the good news. You don't need to grieve. This is a happy day, so knock it off. We go to the meaning of it all. We are with Peter and John, running around, pulling together the loose ends and larger arc of the story, discerning how all these disparate parts now make sense. And like a good preacher, Peter will do just that in the days to come, to distill it all into a nice understandable message. We hear some of this in the Acts passage, in vv.38 ff.:

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear..." 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." "42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter is the interpreter, the preacher. He does us a great service, connecting the dots, reminding us of the overall scheme, how God has been and is at work, and even how we can respond. He articulates the victory and hope, taking away the fear of the grave, putting confidence in Christ's power over life and death.

But there is a risk. That the story lands flat. We may have heard the resurrection story so many times, and we focus on what it means. We don't feel suspense where we should feel suspense; we don't get nervous where we are supposed to get nervous. We don't laugh where we are supposed to laugh. We don't feel the hope surging forth in us when we are supposed to feel that resurgence. We don't feel the turn quite the same way. Instead of sitting on the edge of our seat dressed in costume and singing along, or instead of getting animated and tense the way you might watch a ball game, we sit back because we know the end of the story.

I say this because Easter is not just about what happens at the end of this earthly life. It is not just about eternal life. Easter, for both Mary and Peter, changes everything. If we sit with Mary, her body and spirit captured by this moment and its grief and terror, there comes a moment of transformation when she hears her name. Her name. Not just any name. The sonnet that Cassie read highlights this moment for Mary. In the structure of the sonnet, the first eight lines set up the situation, the proposition. The last six are the resolution, which comes when Jesus starts to speak to Mary. In the last two lines we hear, "And then she hears her name, she hears Love say The Word that turns her night, and ours, to Day." Can we still feel it? Do we still relate to it? That moment when our night turns to day?

And if that hearing your name called can turn your night to day, the story is far from over, is it not?

You see one of the mistakes the disciples and followers of Jesus made on this dark weekend was to assume the story was over. It was all over on Friday when their leader was killed. But the mistake we make in our celebrations of Easter, I wonder, is that we think it is over on Sunday. But you say, Pastor Dave, it is over. Jesus won the victory, conquered the grave, we all sleep well at night now, and when we die we will go to heaven. And I think the second of those two propositions is more true than the first. But the fact is for those early followers, this moment meant that the story continued. God is still moving. Disciples are still be called to follow and to lead.

This is why I made Bonnie read that exceptionally long reading from Acts. I love this reading because it reminds us that Easter was not a one-time wrap it up and put a ribbon on it. It kept on going, unraveling and remaking the world, and in particular, Peter's world.

So, even though Peter has his set message, even though he knows what the resurrection means, it is still unfolding. It is still unfolding so that a message that could become flat and overladen is still surprising even Peter. It is producing wonder. It is calling for change in Peter in the way he sees others, the world, in his perception of how God is working in the world, and even the basis of Peter's own place in the tradition.

For in his encounter with Cornelius, he verbalizes the perceptions that are changing: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection."

Gentile and Jew is a distinction that has ordered Peter's world. Clean and Unclean is embedded in everything, it is intertwined with his perceptions of reality, it is all through his scriptures, clean and unclean. Asking Peter to read his scriptures and ignore all the clean/unclean stuff would be like asking us to read the bible without the gospels. Peter is surprised to say the least. But, all is changing. He must see the world anew, with the Spirit's help, a world not ordered by these old binaries. This Easter story, this unfolding life is transforming Peter's life, transforming the way he lives in the world.

And we hear in verse 34: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all." Now the word "everyone" was probably in Peter's sermons before this encounter. But "everyone" means something different to Peter

now. His way of seeing the world has shifted. He now can see Cornelius not just as a Gentile, as someone on the other side of a divide, but as he is described, as a fellow God-fearer. They are brought together, where they were previously separated.

So, I wonder if Peter's ongoing story is a good litmus test as to how we are engaging in the story. Is this new forgiven and enlivened life changing your way of living in the world. Is life at work in you? What is growing in you? Are you inhabited by it, possessed by its possibility? Are we filled with wonder and mystery, more open to the unfolding of God's story within our own story?

On this Easter morning, we come together, and we affirm and proclaim, "Christ is Alive!" Life and hope are returning. But, like when we are connected to a good drama, or movie, or baseball game, do you feel it in you? Because Christ is alive, but he wants to be alive in you. Do you feel life resurging in you? Do you hear Jesus say your name?

We are going to sing in a moment, "Christ is Alive," the words of the second verse are as follows: "Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine, but saving, healing, here and now, and touching every place and time."

Not throned afar, remotely high, untouched, unmoved by human pains,
But daily, in the midst of life, Our Savior in the God-head reigns

In every insult, rift, and war, Where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more, and lives where even hope has died.

The story is alive and connected to our stories. For you see, the cross and resurrection become in our Christian tradition, not just stories of what happened, but the paradigm, the model, the lens by which we understand how God is at work. We are invited to take up our crosses and follow. We participate in baptism, which is our descending and being raised anew, and we are called repeatedly to remember our baptisms. Paul writes in Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

The fifth verse of the hymn is not included in our singing this morning, but it continues,

"Christ is alive, and comes to bring good news to this and every age,
Till earth and sky and ocean ring with joy, with justice, love, and praise."

So, in this Easter season, my prayer is that God might disturb our blissful rest, just as he did with Peter, with a vision of grace unfolding in the world. I pray that we, like Mary, may hear our voices called out again and that we may feel the story alive in us again. And that as we watch life renewed this spring, we might feel it renewing in us as well.

And all God's people said...

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mt 28:1–10; Mk 16:1–8; Lk 24:1–12)

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Peter and Cornelius

10 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" ²² They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he

went in and found that many had assembled;²⁸ and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ Cornelius replied, “Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.³¹ He said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’³³ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

Gentiles Hear the Good News

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.