

Upside Down World Isaiah 25: 6-9 John 12: 1-18

We have spent the past forty days considering our relationship with God and also the impact that the suffering, death AND ultimate resurrection of Jesus has or should have on our lives. Now we gather this Easter morning to celebrate and remember the fact that Jesus Christ overcame death- unbelievable, cruel and powerful death. In proving power over death, Christ turned the world of his disciples upside down.....and also can turn our world upside down if we humbly reach out and humbly give ourselves to living a life worthy of God's love.

Centuries before Jesus lived on this earth, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the great victory God would ultimately win over the enemies of despair, doubt and death. With the awesomeness of God's inspiration, Isaiah, who lived somewhere about 700B.C. could "see" into the future several hundreds of years and dared proclaim a day when the Lord God would triumph. The real splendor of Isaiah's faith can be appreciated only when we remember that for the greater part of their history, the Hebrew people had no real hope of a life beyond death or could even imagine a day when God would wipe the tears and doubts from their faces. Isaiah speaks first of God's victory over despair, when he says, "God will destroy on this mountain the sheet that is cast over all peoples." Isaiah's people were victims of a deep despair as the nation went down in ruins and all around them evil was seemingly triumphant over good. Isaiah's great vision can give new meaning to the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death in the resurrection. If the story of Jesus ended at the cross, it would seem as if God were powerless to do anything about human despair and disappointment. But Isaiah envisions a day when not human cleverness, but the power of God would defeat the evil of this world.

Isaiah also suggests a second victory for God- this time over doubt. Isaiah describes the experience of doubt with the words, "A sheet that is spread over all the nations." The real enemy of the human spirit is doubt shown as unbelief- a feeling that our failures and our guilt are too great for even the power of God to forgive. The resurrection should be proof of God's power to change lives.

Isaiah also looks forward to a day when God will be victorious over the last great enemy of the human spirit- death itself. Isaiah writes, "He will swallow up death forever, and will wipe all tears." In the living Christ, we can face even the experience of death because we have the hope of eternal life.

It is the Gospel writer, John, who gives us the description of how the resurrection impacted the personal experiences of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John himself. For the friends of Jesus, the previous Friday meant failure, defeat, disgrace, and the shattered end of all their hopes and dreams.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all record several women coming to the tomb in order to complete the preparation of Jesus' body for burial as was the custom. In John, only Mary Magdalene is mentioned. Mary Magdalene- whose life had been dramatically changed because of Jesus- was obviously distraught by Jesus' crucifixion just two days earlier. She believed this person, Jesus, who had given her a new lease on life, was gone and the grief and confusion of the past days had to have been overwhelming.

The Sabbath was past and even though it is still dark, she is drawn to where Jesus' body had been placed. Jesus was dead. Not from some terrible accident or from one of many diseases. Jesus was dead because of the murderous rage of two clashing societies who could find their only brief point of agreement with the conclusion that this prophet from Galilee had threatened them both. Jesus' death might bring a moment of peace between them, but it brought no peace to Mary or any of those who loved him and placed so much hope on him.

Mary's focus is on Jesus' death and her need to properly prepare his body for burial. Thus, when she arrives at the tomb only to find the stone covering the door had been removed....she runs, in a panic, straight to the disciples to tell them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

The next verses in this Gospel reading record Peter and John running to the tomb and also finding it empty. John is the only writer who records finding the linen wrappings that had been around Jesus' dead body lying there, but John is even more specific about the cloth that had been on Jesus' head lying rolled up neatly by itself. For just a moment allow your mind to imagine that- Jesus tidying up the tomb before leaving it!

After the disciples leave the tomb, Mary remains and goes inside where she finds angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They ask why she is weeping, to which she replies as she told the disciples, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Repeating these words a second time shows her firm belief that Jesus was dead and that his body had been stolen.

As Mary leaves the tomb, she encounters someone she believes to be the gardener. When asked why she is weeping, she replies for a third time, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." In all her humanness, her belief is based on life experience having watched Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial. Jesus was dead and her heart was heavy with sorrow and burdened by her desire to anoint his body one last time.

Her encounter with the one she believed was the gardener, turned her life upside down. Her life moved from one of great sorrow to one of unbelievable joy with a single word, "Mary." When Jesus called her by name, her eyes opened and even though it was impossible to

comprehend, she recognized him. Reading this part of the resurrection story thrills me every time! Can't you almost sense just a bit of what she must have felt? What about those times when we watch the tragedy of earthquakes or tornadoes- rubble everywhere and yet sometimes a day or two later a person, given up for dead, is miraculously found alive. Or standing at the bedside of a critically ill loved one anticipating death and then as if a miracle happens, health is restored. These and other experiences in OUR lives may give us just a small taste of what Mary might have been feeling and her emotions being turned upside down upon hearing her name called by Jesus. In her mind she knew it wasn't possible and yet Christ called her name.

Mary's closed world is broken open when Jesus calls her name. Something illogical, impossible, and unnatural has taken place. The One whom she watched die now greets her by name. Established scientific rules as to what can happen were now overthrown and our human minds struggle to comprehend such a thing as a resurrection- life returned to a truly dead body. Many attempts have been made to explain Jesus' resurrection and unfortunately when failing to do so, have discarded the whole account as only a myth. The problem is not in the inability to believe in Jesus' resurrection, but rather a failure of belief in God. If we constrain and limit what God can be and do to what we can understand, then we will be left with a world view that can believe Elvis is alive and that aliens exist out there all the while declaring God is dead.

But the firm declaration of Easter is that Christ is not only alive, surpassing the limits of our imagination, but promises eternal- not earthly- eternal life to everyone who opens a faithful heart to receive that mystery. Christ's resurrection IS a mystery beyond the limits of human understanding, but it is a reality nevertheless available only through hearts of faith.

Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene turned her world upside down with a simple call of her name. Her doubt and that of others around her was transformed into hope, joy and commitment to share the Good News with everyone they knew. Mary's reaction was one of running- not just maybe mentioning it the next time she saw them- but running to the disciples proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord!"

Just as with Mary, the voice of Jesus calling OUR name shatters our customary world and can open faithful hearts and eyes. The old worries and concerns are turned upside down. While the realities of present days need to have attention, they no longer need to consume our very souls.

Easter is a festival of joy. Easter tells us there is eternal life available to each of us through Christ's conquering death. Through the Easter promises, Christ calls each of us by name. What is our response?? Is it: "I prefer to be in control and since it is impossible to believe that a true coming back to life happened....so thus, why believe?" Or do we rely on a God who is

able to not only conquer death but offer life eternal for each of us? Through eyes of faith we can then say with Mary, "I have seen the Lord!" and follow through with words and actions that confidently show our experience.

Christ offers to us- the reality of turning OUR world of worry, doom and gloom- turning it upside down to one of joy, peace and hope. The realities of life have and continue to challenge all of us and our world, especially this past year. However, if our only reality is on that which WE can control, then with eyes focused inward, we find ourselves in a world of worry, doom and gloom. With a heart truly open through faith, we can accept and experience Christ's offer of joy, peace and hope. That certainly doesn't mean every part of our human existence will be without challenges. But with a faithful reliance on a God who knows my name as well as the number of hairs on my head, an inner life of joy, peace and hope can be mine and I will have strength to endure.

The offer is there- what is our response? Is it possible for a life truly turned upside down by Jesus Christ be one of always looking and expecting problems in life? Is it possible for a congregation whose life has truly been turned upside down by faith in the risen Christ, only wringing its hands over lessening member numbers and decreasing dollars in the offering plate? Or, through the love of Christ, given so completely and the example of the unfathomable power of God overcoming death- should our lives- individually or collectively, be ones of imagining, through faith, the possibilities available to us? Should our lives- when Jesus calls us by name- respond with Mary, "I have seen the Lord!" and move faithfully forward sharing with everyone the wonderful promise beyond our imagination- that of eternal life? Amen

Easter Sunday, 2021 Karen Houtman