

Easter Sermon
April 8, 2012
Trinity Church in Menlo Park
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A few weeks ago, our Senior Associate Rector, better known as Frannie, had the opportunity to travel far from home to Africa, to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to attend an event that some, a few years earlier, would have thought impossible. She traveled to the first graduation ceremony of the City of Joy, a center established for women who have been victims of the most horrible violence imaginable. The goal of the City of Joy is to provide up to 180 women a year with an opportunity to heal emotionally from their trauma, rebuild their lives, turn their pain into power, and return to their communities as leaders. Those communities, by the way, are villages which have rejected these women, who are seen in that culture as somehow being at fault for their own victimization.

Frannie returned telling stories of her experiences. She shared some of them with us around our weekly staff meeting. One of those stories that was particularly haunting to me was the story of women who found themselves unable to connect with their children who were conceived and born as a result of the violence these women experienced. For those women, their children were living reminders of their victimhood, their rejection by their communities, and the living nightmare their lives had become. Some of the women could barely stand to look at their own children.

Yet, through the work of the City of Joy, the pained relationships between those women and their children began to be transformed. The women were able to see their children with new eyes, eyes that were not clouded by shadows of pain and violence, but eyes that were now able to look upon their children with love. The women of the City of Joy, and their children, have found new life, a life which marks a radical change from the lives into which they had been thrust.

I begin this morning with the women of the City of Joy because for me, their story is a modern-day story of Resurrection. It is a story of Easter in action, for wherever new life arises, wherever people are freed from old lives of pain, there the Risen Christ is truly to be found.

The good news that Frannie brought from across the sea of new life arising at the City of Joy is really not all that different from the good news of the Risen Christ that has been handed down to us in the gospels.

The New Testament stories about the appearances of the Risen Christ may be many and varied, and not all in agreement with respect to the details, but the stories about the early disciples of Jesus who experienced those appearances are rather consistent. The texts agree that after Jesus was arrested, the disciples for the most part abandoned him, generally kept their distance from the crucifixion, and then after Jesus died, they went together into hiding, terrified that the forces which had conspired

against Jesus would turn their attention to his followers. Just as the passage from Mark's Gospel this morning says that the women at the tomb "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," the disciples were gripped by a fear that kept them silent and unseen.

Into the midst of this fear something, or rather, *someone*, appeared. That someone was Christ, who appeared to them not as a ghost or as an hallucination, but as the Living One. And, borrowing a phrase from the poet Christian Wiman, this "most blinding illumination" did indeed radically change their lives. The disciples emerged from their silence to proclaim to all that Christ was risen. They came out of hiding, walking the streets of Jerusalem with this message and carrying it from there to far flung places. And for most of them, their commitment to this proclamation, to this "blinding illumination", led them to their deaths. The power of the Risen Christ lifted them out of their fear and emboldened their hearts. The new life that they witnessed and discovered in the Risen Christ became new life in them, and they were changed, radically and fundamentally.

New life for the disciples. New life for the women of the City of Joy and their children. That is Resurrection. That is what we gather today to celebrate.

Of course, it is not necessary to travel thousands of miles or back through time to find people who are gripped by fear and trauma, who are longing for new life and, at the same time, wondering whether it is really even possible. We can find those people right here in our own country, in our own communities. We can find those people right here in this room today.

Six weeks ago, on February 26, we observed the First Sunday in Lent. And on that day, we invited those who were in church to create prayer cards expressing their hope for new life in this Easter season. We received well over a hundred prayer cards, some with drawings, most with words. Here is just a random sample of what some of those cards expressed:

One person's card prayed for "clarity of purpose, new beginnings, time with family, trust in God's will for us, [and] experiencing God's love in thin places." Another prayed for "Grace to hear God's call to new ministry." One expressed a longing to be "open to possibilities and healing." Another prayed for a "fresh start, staying close to God, living with compassion, pure, simple, free of guilt." There was a prayer for "patience and understanding" and a prayer for "an abundance of charity." One card prayed two simple words: "forget self". Another prayed "to be a better husband, father, and child of God." There were prayers for maturity, prayers that we might be nicer and kinder to one another. There were prayers for peace "inside and out". One card prayed for "a soul that is open, at rest, no longer striving, but happy to just be beloved."

Each of these cards contains a longing for new life, just as deep and profound and necessary as the longing hearts of the traumatized women in the Congo and the longing hearts of the disciples, devastated by the death of Jesus, so many centuries ago. The

promise of Easter is that each of these longings can be met in the Risen Christ, in whom we can indeed find the new life we seek.

The journey toward the Risen Christ, the journey into new life, begins with the hopes and longings expressed on those prayer cards, born out of our current struggles and burdens. But the journey doesn't end there. The Roman Catholic nun and writer, Joan Chittister, describes this eloquently:

The old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own. Unfortunately, we so often miss it. Jesus, you see, is already gone from one tomb. The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own, leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted and politicians condemned.

As Sister Joan's words make abundantly clear, the journey into new life requires a willingness on our part to let go of the old life. The stories of the women of the City of Joy embracing new life are also stories about them letting go of their old lives. The stories of the disciples finding new courage and new purpose in the proclamation of the Risen Christ are also stories about people who are stepping out of their comfort zones and stepping away from old patterns of thinking and being. Where once human beings stood at the door of Jesus' tomb and looked inside to discover that he was no longer there, now God stands at the doors of our tombs wondering why we are still inside.

So Easter is not only about a Christ who is Risen, but about a humanity that is alive with new possibilities that reflect our deepest, God-centered longings. Easter is not only about an embracing of new life, but is also about a letting go of everything that stands in the way of that new life. Easter is not only about stepping into the light of God, but about stepping out of the darkness of the tomb. Easter is not just about God reaching into the fear of people centuries ago, but it is about God's desire to reach into our fear now.

And Easter is not about magic. Easter is not about praying for new life and then waiting for God to somehow magically give it to us. That would not be stepping out of the tomb and into the light – that would be staying in the tomb and waiting for the light to somehow find us. The story of the Risen Christ is offered to us not as magic but as invitation, and as assurance that when we reach for new life, it will be there. As the angel explained to the women at the tomb, Jesus has gone on ahead of us, and he waits for us to run to him. Just as the women at the City of Joy made an effort to reach that place of transformation and had to make a conscious decision to step into the light that the City of Joy offered them, so we must make a conscious decision to follow Jesus into transformation.

The original form of St. Mark's Gospel makes this clear. The majority of the most ancient versions of Mark's Gospel end exactly where we stopped reading this morning: with the women having heard the news of the Resurrection, but out of fear, not telling

anyone. Later, a longer ending was attached to the Gospel in order to include accounts of the Risen Christ appearing to his disciples. Those who came after Mark must have thought it somewhat scandalous that the original Gospel omitted these accounts.

Personally, I think Mark knew exactly what he was doing. Mark, I think, knew that the Christian vocation was not to wait around for the Risen Christ to show up. Rather, the Christian vocation is to run after the Risen Christ, to go to Galilee -- wherever Galilee is for each of us -- to meet the Living One who has gone before us. Mark knew that new life in Christ didn't just fall into our laps while we were skulking about in graveyards. New life in Christ is, rather, to be enthusiastically pursued with all the joy and energy we can muster. So he didn't include any stories of disciples waiting about to be surprised by a Risen Christ. He ended his Gospel with an instruction to run and meet the Risen Christ.

So I invite you this morning to open up your hearts, and examine your deepest longings for new life. And then, in the spirit of Mark's Gospel, in the spirit of the Living Christ, let those longings energize you to make the journey to your own City of Joy, leaving the darkness of the tomb behind you and embracing the abundant and inexhaustible life that God has prepared for you in the place where the Risen Christ waits to meet you.