

Acts 10:34-35
John 20:1-18

word count: 1725

Where are the bonnets? What happened to them? The Easter bonnet came from the custom of wearing flowers around your head to signify that Spring is here. Spring is here, so where are the Easter bonnets?

My youth group sat in the balcony at church on Easter when I was growing up, and we looked down upon a sea of white gloves and hats. The boys had to carry fresh white handkerchiefs, which we thought were dated back then. We made parachutes from them, and I was good at it. If you could loosen a button from your shirt, you could gently pull out the thread in one long piece, and then break it and tie it to each of the four corners of the handkerchief. By folding the church bulletin cover into a small square, it provided the ballast for the parachute. Then you wrote a note that said something like, “Boring sermon, send oxygen” and, waiting for the right moment when no one was looking up, you lofted it up into the air and down it would go. One particular Sunday it landed inside the brim of Mrs. Fahs’ big straw hat, where it stayed. The image held our fascination for the whole hour. No one told her. We stood to sing, we sat and listened, we prayed...and all the time it nested there. The handwriting on the note was mine. When the service ended, we watched her get up and go to the door to greet the minister, and then walk down the steps to the parking lot, with the parachute resting inside the brim. We never heard a word about it afterwards—I was sure that a call would be placed to my parents—and we never did it again.

As I reflect on why people come to church on Easter, I think of things like this. I remind myself that although I thought of myself as a spiritual young person, there were many reasons why I came, only some of which involved the deepening of faith. Other reasons included; friends, finding a sense of community among people I might otherwise never have known, hearing music that filled me, facing questions that were challenging to my belief, and sharing in service projects that led me to know that from those to whom a lot has been given, much is expected, and there is some satisfaction to be found in delivering upon those expectations.

Perhaps at the heart of it all is the sense of knowing that you belong—somewhere, and in that somewhere, among people you believe are your own, and more than that—you belong to something greater than yourself.

Why have you come to church this Easter morning?

For years, I took for *granted* that church would be fuller on this morning than any other Sunday. But I wrestle with the irony that on the day when this account is read in church that involves either the biggest leap of faith or the most careful sidestepping into metaphor; when empty tombs, angels in white, racing disciples, weeping Mary’s, and a risen Christ all appear—this is the day when people who otherwise have either dismissed the story or linger on the margins with doubts too strong to stay within a Christian community, make a point to come to hear this particular description of the events following Jesus’ death.

One way or another, there is *something* about today that calls you here to listen to it read once more; not only to hear it read, but to sing about it, be lifted by the music that celebrates it, to be surrounded by its symbols, to see the kids in the Easter egg hunt, and to take part in the old Easter call-and-response whereby the pastor says, “He is Risen...” and you say (“He is Risen Indeed”...) And then the word that goes missing during Lent reappears—“Alleluia.”

Church membership is different from a generation ago—more and more people are coming and going from one tradition to another, and we know that is true here. Roughly 20% of this

congregation grew up in the United Church of Christ, like me. Add other mainline Protestants, and we are up to 50%. Roughly 25% come from conservative or evangelical traditions. Maybe an additional 10% were Catholic; others were Mormon, Unitarian, Jehovah's Witness or no religious background at all. We no longer all share the same fundamental understanding of Christianity.

N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg are friends and scholars on different sides of the theological aisle—but not too far off that they can't appreciate the perspectives on Easter that each has to offer.

Wright says, "Easter is about the living God claiming the world of space, time, and matter as God's own. That is why Christians celebrate it with candies and flowers and incense and processions and banners and, above all, music: the world of creation has been reclaimed by the living and healing God."

Borg says, "Parables are true independent of their factuality—to 'get' a parable is to get its meaning. Seeing the Easter stories as parables need not involve a denial of their factuality. Believe what you want about whether the story happened this way—now let's talk about what the story means."

With what ears are you hearing the message of today?

It is a message of urgency and excitement—an unbelievable turn of events. Mary Magdalene makes the discovery that the tomb is empty—and she starts the race. She runs to tell Peter and John. John is meant to be recognized as the "author" of this gospel, so his identity is modestly hidden as "the other disciple," though no bones are spared about the fact that he is "the disciple that Jesus loved," and in the footrace to the tomb, he beat Peter to it.

It is two days after a public humiliation, an event that contained the deepest sense of disappointment, heartbreak, pain and despondency that can be felt by human being. Time slowed down—everything seemed to stop. And now there is a footrace after the dawn reveals that all is not at an end after all.

So, it is a story of transformation that we gather to hear every year. On this day in churches everywhere a resurrection account is told that represents transformation, and it is this *possibility* that all things can be transformed that speak to us louder than anything.

Why? Because we come from the most broken of places. We are broken in many ways—broken in spirit, in our work, in our relationships, or in our grief and worry. Some of us are broken in our finances, or by health issues, by depression, or even some of us by addictions that keep us from reaching our potential. We have broken bridges with those to whom we belong, or allowed relationships to drift apart. We have to hear in a way we know is true, that we can be made whole again out of our brokenness.

The quote used so often by our church came as a note of hope in answer to an attitude of despair. When the comedian Gracie Allen was dying, her husband George Burns told her that he didn't think he could go on without her. Her response was, "George, never place a period where God has placed a comma."

Easter Sunday is the story of discovering the comma after everyone gave up hope and only saw the period. And, today belongs to everyone. Peter may have lost the footrace to the tomb with John, but it is Peter who speaks up and says that although we may come from many different understandings and backgrounds, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who respects him and does what is right is acceptable to him." It is the message of inclusion—the circle is wider, in fact it is Universal and grows increasingly so.

So then, Easter is a story of transformation, but it is also a story of belonging. What does it mean to know that you belong?

Author Ann Weems was reminded of the time she was in Wisconsin leading a worship service at an Interim Ministers' Conference. Before supper that first night, a man with a southern

accent came up to her and asked, “Where are you from?” When she responded, “Nashville,” he smiled and said he had known it.

“Who are your people?” he asked.

Ann recalls the surge of memories that swept over her. She saw faces and names and even smelled some of the sweet aromas associated with home. She wrote, “I knew what it meant: To whom do you belong? It is an ancient question. It’s a means of identification, a claiming of ties.” It can instantly open doors or shut them in your face.

“My father is Tom Barr,” Ann replied.

His face lit up with a look of recognition. He told the people with him, “She’s one of us! She’s Tom Barr’s daughter.” They gathered around and led her to their table, talking about people they knew twenty-five years ago in Nashville.

“We dashed back in time and it felt right,” Ann recalled. “I belonged. I was accepted. I know who my people are.”¹

If there are many aspects to being a part of a church, one of them is a sense in this place that you belong—there is a history among many of us already, and the comma in this means that a new chapter and history can begin at anytime for anyone who walks through the doors. We love and forgive, and seek and receive acceptance. We know who our people are.

Last week was Palm Sunday, and we shared in the great procession of life in the sadness of losing a friend, as we have done in the past and will continue to do when grief comes our way. We also saw something new in the story of this procession, as a new baby, Dylan Ryan Dobbert was born into his community where he now belongs. There is no partiality; the Spirit is in us and we shall live. You belong. You are accepted. You know who your people are—so bring out your bonnet. As theologian St. Gracie of Allen would say, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

Sermon Resource

1. Ann Weems, *Family Faith Stories*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, 18-19.

Scripture for Sunday, March 23, 2008

Acts 10:34-35

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."

John 20:1-18

1 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.

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. **19** When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.