

We are here on Easter morning in larger numbers partly because there is a story that is told, wrestled with, dismissed, rejected, modified, and sometimes believed either wholly or in what Coleridge called a “willing suspension of disbelief,” because people need to be together in a place where we can live, “as if.”

“As if,” there could be hope in the midst of despair.

“As if,” new life will always rise up in the midst of death.

“As if,” love will triumph over hate.

In short, “as if,” despite the evidence, we can believe in a promise of being destined for something better when the difficulties of today have ceased to be. Bill Coffin once said, “Hope arouses, as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.

Easter is a day when we seem to know by instinct that our music needs to be joy-filled and bursting with promise. Today calls for brass and timpani because *this* is the Sunday when we *expect* our particular tradition of Easter music to lift us up to the skies. This is the day when symbols of new life line our chancel stairs, when “Alleluia’s” are lifted again in every form, and children hunt for Easter eggs on the lawn.

Is it possible in the midst of a world that always seems on the edge of madness, while we try to manage within an economy that has long been on the brink, and live with tensions (be they personal, familial, workplace or national) that there is a place where we can go that has a story that offers hope; one that is ultimately victorious over fear, hate, and even death itself?

In the synoptic gospels, there were some women who raced to the tomb that first Easter morning—and according to the Gospel of John, there were even some men who managed to get up in time to join them.

Can the church gather on a Sunday morning, despite all that is going on in our lives, and seeing the contradictions in a story of hope and new life ahead in the evidence all around us in this world... act and believe “as if” the story was good news to race after?

John Buchanan, watching his sanctuary fill up on Easter Sunday in his forty-some years of preaching in Chicago, says, “I have concluded that people turn out on Easter not entirely out of convention and custom, but because at the deepest level they want to hear a word about life in the midst of death.”

All of the expected preparations for Easter Sunday show that the demand for such a word of hope and life in the midst of death *must* be present in the congregation here this morning, or the church has not done its job. Can you feel the beginnings of some hope?... Can you feel the life pulsing in this room?... Yes?

There was once a man who had been shipwrecked on a remote island in the Pacific, and was alone for 20 years. When a ship finally arrived, his rescuers were impressed with the three buildings he had constructed on the island, and asked him about them. He replied, “Well, this is my house. It is simple, but comfortable.” They pointed to another structure with a stone base and high, wooden rafters and asked him about it. With pride, he said, “Oh, that’s my church. It’s a wonderful church and I really hate to leave it.” And then a member of the rescue party asked him about the third structure. The man said, “Oh, that’s the church I used to go to.”

A church has to offer a spirit-filled Sunday for the days in which we live, or it risks becoming dry, static; an inward-looking valentine to its past. Do you feel a sense of spirit?

Before we talk about the Gospel of John where those women and men raced to the tomb, let's talk about to whom the church should be reaching this morning. The word of hope, the word of life in the midst of death; the joy found that we are charged to give away—is universal—it cannot be owned by any specific group or demographic.

The God as “Love” we name and the Jesus we proclaim are as universal as love itself. The message of hope that goes out from the church on Easter morning as it does on *any* morning, belongs equally to women as it does men; it proclaims as “beloved,” the gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person just as it does the “straight.” The message of hope and the promise of life in the midst of death breaks out of the tomb, just as our gospel accounts claim that there is *nothing* that can hold it in—it is something worth racing towards and embracing for any and all, however you hear or understand it. Immigrant or national, racial or ethnic composition, religious or political affiliation, western or eastern hemisphere; isn't there something universal in the message that love conquers all, that life does exist in the midst of death?

The Easter message encourages us to race towards good news, “as if” it will be there—despite the evidence all around us, and with the certainty that everyone is invited to partake.

Any church that preaches a message of exclusion, prejudice or sanctified hate is both doctrinally disturbed and spiritually negligent. Are we the church that welcomes any and all to the table?

In the synoptic gospels, it is the women who are racing to the tomb; they are the first disciples, the first ones to look for good news. In Matthew it is Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.” In Mark, Mary Magdalene is accompanied by Mary, the mother of James and Salome. In Luke, Joanna and some other women join them. Only in the Gospel of John do men enter the picture, and when they do, they naturally become competitive. Mary Magdalene had gone and found the tomb empty, and ran to tell Peter the news. And then it says, “and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.” Who is this? Well, whose gospel account are we reading? Lest we forget, the writers of the Gospel of John want to remind us that John himself is the disciple who loved Jesus *so* much, that he outraced Peter to the tomb. John places himself in this account, “as if” he was there. But, he has the idea that I'm going after correct—he is racing to find some good news—he is living, “as if.”

They raced to the tomb, as people who lived, “as if” miracles could occur and resurrections might take place when we need to believe in them most. But then, we are people who are called to live, “as if,” and find the joy within.

Our progressive churches understand the call to do mission in the world. Soon, our own community we will be collecting food once again for the food pantries, walking in the AIDS Walk, and later in the Crop Walk. We are a key church in issues of equality, and will continue to be one. We are doing long range planning to see how we can expand our ministry into more hands-on projects. Our Advocates ministry holds up issues of justice for us to act upon. We are generous with our stewardship and giving, having raised a generous sum for Haitian earthquake relief. But, let's not forget to celebrate the joy of being a community of faith that brings the word of hope to each other and the person that just walked through the door.

Now, we have been living in hard times for a long time. John Buchanan said, “I have concluded that people turn out on Easter not entirely out of convention and custom, but because at the deepest level they want to hear a word about life in the midst of death.” Like the disciples racing to the tomb, people come out today more than any other, because they want a word of hope.

Help me out, now. Some of you come here today with a crisis in your lives. Can you live “as if” the message of new life on this Easter Sunday can apply directly to whatever situation you are facing?

Some of you come here today with personal issues...unemployment issues...health issues... family issues... Can you leave this place and dare to believe “as if,” there could be hope in the midst of despair, and life in the midst of death?

Some of you come here not quite believing that you are welcome because of who you are...Can you leave this place and dare to believe “as if” love actually does conquer all?

Can you live “as if” the news of Easter was true, in the joy and hope you can feel coming all around you? Don’t worry it’s coming—I’m living “as if” it was, and I’ve got a hunch it’s true.

Preacher and teacher Will Willimon, writing in the last issue of *Christian Century*, wrote about visiting Haiti right after the earthquake. He said,

“On a mission trip to Haiti with undergrads, there was widespread agreement that the most disarming thing about the country was the laughter of the children, along with their raucous singing. How dare they sing when their life expectancy is so horribly short? Was their laughter an escapist respite from the unmitigated tragedy of their lives, or a smart rebuke to our assumption that their lives were trapped in tragedy?

“As darkness fell upon Port-au-Prince after the earth heaved that January night, people danced in the streets and sang hymns. On CNN, Anderson Cooper was incredulous.

“But those singing-through-their-tears Haitians make me wonder: a truly theological analysis suggests that we may be meant by God for music, destined for joy.”

What if the women and men who came to the tomb on Easter morning are right? What if the Good Fridays in our lives aren’t necessarily the end of the story? What if Jesus told the truth when he declared, toward the opening of his ministry, that he was turning today’s tears into tomorrow’s laughter?

What if, in spite of the evidence all around us, we *can* believe, “As if.” Can you believe that there can be, indeed there must be hope right now in the midst of despair. (yes)

Live “As if.” Can you believe that we can have wholeness again in our lives.

Live “As if.” Can you believe that new life will always rise up in the midst of death. It is risen indeed.

Hope is risen—(*it is risen indeed*)

New life is risen—(*it is risen indeed*)

Love is risen—(*it is risen indeed*) Amen and Alleluia.

Sermon Resource

William H. Willimon, “Now can we sing? The Easter response,” *Christian Century*, March 23, 2010

Scripture for Sunday, April 4, 2010

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.