

“The Surprise of Easter”
April 9, 2023

Matthew 28:1-10

Outside the front doors of our church the daffodils have come up once more. I saw them the first time this past week and I remembered that wonderful Easter hymn, “Now the Green Blade Rises”:

Love lives again, that with the dead has been,
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.

Those sprouting daffodils always come as a bit of a surprise to me. Yes, all winter long, I know the bulbs are there. I know they will arise from the earth. But one day it’s bare ground. The next day, green!

This is what Howard Thurman called a “glad surprise.”

Thurman tells us that “There are surprises that are shocking, startling, frightening, and bewildering. But the glad surprise is something different from all of these. It carries with it the element of elation, of life, of something over and beyond the surprise itself. The experience itself comes at many levels: the simple joy that comes when one discovers that the balance in the bank is larger than the personal record indicated – and there is no error in accounting; the realization that one does not have his doorkey – the hour is late and everyone is asleep – but someone very thoughtfully left the latch off, ‘just in case’; the dreaded meeting in a conference to work out some problems of misunderstanding, and things are adjusted without the emotional lacerations anticipated; the report from the doctor’s examination that all is well, when one was sure that the physical picture was very serious indeed.

“All of these surprises,” Thurman tells us, “are glad!”

Spring is just such a glad surprise—and it carries with it always a new sense of the world that is greater than the surprise. In this way spring is something of a holy symbol, a visual sign each year of an ultimate reality: that life does conquer death; that our wintry hearts can thaw; that God can bring something new out of barren circumstances. So, in the seventh century John of Damascus could announce in his Easter hymn: “’Tis the spring of souls today.”

In these days we stop and look—even the trees that were bare and ground that was hard are telling the good news of God’s “Yes” to all creation. The reality above and beyond and beneath everything else is that God is redeeming all of creation—and, yes, you and I are included. We find ourselves raised up, standing tall, given clear sight and a new spirit, and sent forth to announce that new creation in the rest of our world.

The glad surprise of spring in all its beauty informs our Easter joy; the glad surprise of new life in spring tells us something of Easter resurrection.

But while our celebration of Easter is connected to the spring, it is not spring that we announce in the church.

Having been through any number of springs, we know that the hope and promise of spring fades. “Nature’s first green is gold,” Robert Frost told us.

Then leaf subsides to leaf
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

The hope and promise of spring fades along with its beauty.

Easter, however, speaks to us of something greater than spring. It tells us something we *want* to hear, something we *need* to hear, because it speaks to us as adults who know the weariness, the pain, the profound loneliness, the confusion, and the fear of living.

And, you know, it also speaks to children and youth who also know some of the difficult times of life.

Young and old alike, look again as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb at the break of day. They expect to find death, not life.

Even so, we can see their arrival at the tomb as an act of faith.

Faith that sustains us does not overlook the harsh realities of our lives. Life doesn’t always go as we would want it to go. Friends betray, relationships collapse, children get ill. Violence is all too common.

Many people want to ignore the shadow side of life. Many of us would skip over the events of Good Friday. But recognizing that we, too, walk in the valley of deep shadows, we come closer to the power of the resurrection.

In their sorrow and confusion, the two Marys hear only a simple and seemingly impossible message: “He has been raised; he is not here.”

This is only Easter message we get as well. “He is risen...” We aren’t told how. We aren’t told when. Nobody ever knew exactly what happened because nobody was there to see it. But it hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing because in the last analysis what convinced the people he had risen from the dead was not the absence of his corpse but his living presence.

And that has been the case ever since.

“He is risen; he is not here.”

Yes, it is easier to say and believe that spring has come again.

But resurrection invites us to look at the beautiful truth of spring—and then to look beyond it to something greater. We will see wonder upon wonder and all of them true. As one early Christian put it: “The Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed because it is absurd. And he was buried and rose again; the fact is certain because it is impossible.”

An impossible possibility.

A statement of our absurd faith.

A glad surprise.

Spring is the beginning, not the culmination. Just as the green shoots outside the front door of the church tell us of more life to come, so the Resurrection of Jesus comes as the first fruits of a promised new creation.

Jesus' resurrection is the beginning, not the culmination of the Christian hope. The victory of Easter is not yet complete, but it is promised.

As one person put it: "In the midst of our desolation, we find the risen Christ, triumphant over death and still shockingly alive, present to us in ways we cannot understand much less explain. In Christ we find vibrancy of life and a firm compassion that does not deny our suffering but transforms and illumines it."ⁱ

The words the women hear sink in. They are in the wrong place. The One they seek has gone ahead of them.

Always he goes ahead of us; we never know where or when we shall see him; we only know we cannot escape him.ⁱⁱ

The cross speaks of God standing with us in the flux of events—and God is a sure presence in difficult times.

The resurrection speaks of God's being always ahead of events and is therefore the great ground of hope for the world.

The hope of the resurrection is the hope that Christ is the first of many, that God is still at work in us and through us transforming the world, bringing life out of death.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ tells us that God is bringing forth a new creation and that we are a part of it. This is the ground of hope for all creation.

Our task is to carry that hope into the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

At every turn God opens new possibilities for us. At every turn forgiveness is offered. At every turn we can, if we choose, love and be loved. At every turn there is wonder and miracle if we live with eyes open.

This is not the language of the tomb. It is the language of resurrection.

Possibility is the language of resurrection.

The resurrection means that each of our days is filled with possibility.

The women hear the resurrection message, run from the tomb, and find Jesus standing in their path.

We will not find the risen Christ by staying where we are.

We will not find the risen Christ by visiting the tombs of the past.

But if we get up and move

If we recognize that we have died and have been raised with Christ to a new way of living

If, when we have cause for complaint, we forgive as God forgives us

If we let the message of Christ—the new possibility—dwell among us in all its richness

We will see the risen Christ in the midst of life all around us. We will discover wonders and miracles unexpected and undeserved.

Christ is alive in the world, leading us with the good news of a new power unleashed on the earth.

The risen Christ is always going ahead of us.

When we refuse to give in to evil,

When we will not give in to the cycle of violence,

When we seek to love one another,

then we discover that the risen Christ is always going ahead of us.

The edges of God show much that is tragic. We cannot be callous toward the suffering around us. Our response to a world in pain is neither a flippant optimism that things must be fine if Christ is risen nor a dejected pessimism that evil has been victorious.

We who have heard the Easter story are invited to bring it toward fulfillment in our world, in our time.

Resurrection answers crucifixion.

Life answers death.

This is the good news we find in the first and fading beauty of spring.

And in the unfading promise of God's new creation, in the first fruits of that new creation, we find the eternal joy of Easter.

ⁱ <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2001/04/Easter-Changes-Everything.aspx>

ⁱⁱ See Lamar Williamson, *Mark*, Interpretation Commentary Series.

ⁱⁱⁱ See discussion by Mary Ann Tolbert in her commentary on Mark in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, 1992, Westminster Press, pg. 274.