

Easter Sunday Sermon

April 16, 2017

Rev. Kevin Omi Sycamore Congregational Church UCC

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1, John 20:1, 2, 11, 14-16 (at end of document)

(note: both Rev. Yoshioka and I preached this morning, so this sermon is short!)

As Yoshioka Sensei and I were planning our messages for today, we talked about 4 steps on the journey from the mystery of God to joy: silence, notice, change, joy; silence, notice, change, and then joy.

Step 1: Our theme for the forty days between Ash Wednesday and yesterday, Holy Saturday, has been Praying into Silence. We have talked, not only about praying into silence but searching for God in silence. Near the end of our Good Friday Service we listened to a choir sing the words, “Even When God is Silent, I believe in God”.

Our passage from the Prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s intervention in the world; God steps out of the silence, into the breach and saves God’s chosen people. In his time, Isaiah was talking about rescuing the Jewish people- something that happened several times over their long history. They lived in a geopolitical hotspot and, over time, were invaded by the Assyrians from the north, the Egyptians from the south, the Babylonians from the east and the Romans from the west.

But at this particular and holy moment in time, God speaks out of silence, through the prophet Isaiah and says “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Isaiah goes on to say, “you are precious in my sight”. This is how God sees each one of you, each one of us – you are precious, valuable beyond money or any possessions – you are precious in my sight – each one of you.

Step #2: Noticing – or paying attention: before Mary notices Jesus, Jesus notices her and says, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’

When Mary first saw Jesus after he rose from the dead, she did not recognize him. Why? because everything life had taught her to that point, said that when something, like a pet goldfish, or more importantly, when someone dies, that’s it – they are dead. She had seen Jesus die, be taken to the tomb, and she never, ever expected to see him again – so she thought he was the grounds keeper, like the groundskeepers at Sunset View Cemetery, who carefully mow the lawns and keep things looking beautiful and neat.

Noticing:

How many of you have seen a flock of great big Canadian geese, honking and flying in a V-shape, high in the sky? What sound do they make? (honk, honk)

Noticing: How many of you have seen something different - little birds, flying quickly altogether, perhaps from one bush to another?

Little birds can fly so quickly, sometimes they change direction quickly and smoothly, like a school of fish underwater. When a school of fish turns, we see different colors on their bodies. When a flock of birds flies, we notice the difference between their brown wings and light bellies.

Noticing: The other day I was riding my bike on Grizzly Peak, and suddenly a flock of little birds flew straight across the road at the exact same time as I was riding my bike through them. There must have been 15 or 20 birds, in front of me, behind me, above me, all around me, flying quickly. I knew I couldn’t do anything to avoid them – but I also knew they knew how to fly safely around me.

Step #3: Change: It didn’t take more than a split second for the birds to fly safely around me. There was nothing I could do, or that I needed to do, other than to know that the birds would take care of themselves and take care of me. And in that moment, I experienced the birds as a symbol of God’s grace. I was changed in a moment.

God's grace happens like that, in unexpected times, in unexpected ways, to unexpected and unlikely people – like you and me and like Mary.

Riding my bike through a flock of birds startled me, it reminded me of God's grace, but that was nothing compared to what Mary experienced.

Everyone here, take a moment and say your name aloud. Say it again. God heard each one of you, even though we were all saying our names at the same time – because God loves and cares for each one of you.

2000 years ago, Jesus turned to Mary, Mary who loved him with all her heart and simply said her name, "Mary". Just like God said through the prophet Isaiah, "I have called you by name. You are mine." Just like God knows each one of your names this morning. God has called you by name. Whether you have come to our Easter Sunday Service for decades or this is the very first time, God called you to this church, to this community of faith, this, this special morning. God called you by name to experience the joy of new life in the resurrection of Jesus.

How many of you think you are perfect? Or let me ask a different question, how many of you think you are less than perfect?

Here's the Good News – the unexpected, crazy news. You heard it first from Isaiah:

There is nothing that you need to do or to be, in order for God to love you. Just as you are, however you are, God's loves you; always has and always will.

2000 years ago, Jesus was born again, resurrected, so that the women at the tomb would have hope – hope for new life for them and their families, hope for new life for everyone they knew and loved.

Now don't get me wrong – when Jesus walked out of the empty tomb, the Roman soldiers didn't disappear. Nor did peace suddenly break out and poverty and injustice come to an end. When you and I walk out of church today, wars, the threat of war, and injustice will not suddenly come to an end, as much as we pray each Sunday that they might.

But there is a change that God asks of you, that God asks of me, this day of Christ's resurrection – a change of heart:

That morning, the followers of Jesus had a renewed sense of hope that a new world of peace and justice, just might come a little bit closer. That is the hope of people of all faiths – that a better day, a day of God's reign might come just a little bit closer. That's why our new banners proclaim, "We welcome everyone". We welcome people of all ethnicities, all abilities, all economic groups, and all LGBTQ folks. We walk in the tension and God's grace of having people with **both** conservative and progressive views about many things. Everyone who is open to God's grace and the hope of resurrection is welcome at Sycamore....we welcome everyone, and because of that, together we can experience, joy!

Silence, notice, change, and joy.

This morning, Jesus has left the cross behind, Jesus has left the silent tomb, and is present this very morning among us, so that we too, might have new life, new hope, not just for ourselves but for everyone. May God's grace suddenly surround you, like an unexpected flock of little birds. May you suddenly recognize the face of Jesus in everyone you meet. And may we work together, to create a just and joy-filled world for all.

Closing Prayer (offered spontaneously, integrating silence, notice, change, and joy)

Amen.

Isaiah 43:1**Restoration and Protection Promised**

But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

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John 20:1, 2, 11, 14-16**The Resurrection of Jesus**

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. 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.'

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).