Newness of Life
A Sermon for Easter Sunday
Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, April 1, 2018

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

Jesus “has been raised. He is not here,” the young man says. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee,” the young man says. “There you will see him, just as he told you,” the young man says. It is the most shocking news of their lives. The best news in the world. And the women run, their thighs burning, their breath catching in their throats. They run, but instead of crying, “Alleluia! The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!” as we did this morning - as Christians all over the world did this morning – they say … well, they say nothing. They run, filled not with joy but with trepidation; filled not with hope but with dread. Even if they wanted to speak – even if “terror and amazement” had not seized their tongues and their hearts – what would Mary Magdalene, and Mary, and Salome have said? What words could communicate this news? And who would listen? “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

These are the last words of Mark’s brief but powerful Gospel, the oldest in the Bible. It is a troubling ending, to say the least. So troubling that within a few short decades, people thought it necessary to add an alternative conclusion, one with a few more important details. Like if those women said nothing, how did word get out? Did anyone actually see Jesus? And, if so, what was he like? And where did he go, in the end? You know, the end end. In my Bible, this is set apart with a heading, “The Longer Ending of Mark,” and the footnotes explain that after the canonical
gospels were brought together, Mark’s original account seemed too “abrupt and inadequate” to stand alone.¹

That is certainly one way to look at it. But in another sense, Mark vividly captures those earth-shaking moments when Jesus’ disciples – the women – first recognize this miracle. They are caught in that disorienting place between experience and insight. They have seen something, heard something, felt something, that they do not yet understand, and for which they literally have no words. If we’re honest with ourselves, we all know this place. It’s the wilderness that immediately follows the diagnosis, when it seems saying the word “cancer” out loud will make the tumors more real. It’s the new world we discover in grief, taking tentative steps into a reality we resist with every fiber of our being; a reality we aren’t ready to know but cannot seem to avoid. It’s the bewildering space between what was and what is yet to be. Life can, quite literally, take our breath away, and with it our voices.

Okay, okay … but this is Easter! The resurrection is good news, right? The best news! Jesus was dead and now he is risen! He was sealed in a tomb and now he walks free! His story was over and now it continues! What could they possibly fear? What could possibly keep them silent? The truth is, sometimes it can be harder to share our good news than our heartache, because the immensity of our joy is intimately tied to the depth of our love, our hope, and sharing that makes us tremendously vulnerable. Sharing that takes real courage. Think of the couple who finally keeps a pregnancy past the first trimester, and the doctor assures them things are looking great, only they still speak of it in hushed tones, can’t quiet call the grandparents-to-be, because all of the other promising new beginnings ended in blood and tears, and what if this one does, too?

For the women to share their good news, they will have to share their love for Jesus – this man who has been rejected, condemned, and sentenced to capital punishment. For the women to share their good news, they will have to share their disappointment that nothing had turned out as they expected. That Jesus had not been the messiah they thought he would be. For the women to share their good news, they will have to share the agony they felt watching him die, and how scared they are to hope he might be back. They will have to risk not only not being believed, but

not being understood. We are entrusted with all kinds of good news that seems too raw, too real, to name and share.

But here’s the thing: good news always needs to be shared, not only for our own sake but for those around us hungry for hope, longing for love, desperate for resurrection. Before I went to seminary, I spent four years in San Francisco. In my first job, fresh out of college, I worked for Jennifer Siebel Newsom, then the girlfriend of mayor Gavin Newsom (now our Lieutenant Governor) to co-write and co-produce the award-winning documentary film, Miss Representation, which explores representations of women in American media and their influence on our wider culture. Like most people making a passion project, we toiled for months, and then years, hoping a handful of people might someday be interested in what we were creating. But then, incredibly, our little social justice documentary premiered at Sundance, and the trailer went viral, and eventually tens of millions of people in over eighty countries around the world ended up seeing it, and Oprah bought the television rights, and for a generation of young people Miss Representation became part of their awakening to gender norms, stereotypes, and media literacy.

People often ask me how I got involved in such an extraordinary project. It’s an unlikely story. I applied to a job posted on craigslist, and when I had my first in-person interview with Jen at a coffee shop in Russian Hill I was so new to the city that I had to ask her who this Gavin person was she kept mentioning. At some point, she asked me why I was so passionate about women’s rights and cultural change. I took a deep breath and thought of the ways I might respond. I could tell her that as a cultural anthropology major I had studied gender performance and identity construction at length and would bring a critical perspective to such a project. I could say in a general way that I had thought a lot about how media representations of women had negatively impacted my own sense of self-esteem and self-worth. But in the seconds that breath gave me to think and pray, knowing full well that those answers were probably good enough to get me the job, I decided to tell her my good news instead.

So I shared that, less than a year before, I’d been admitted into an inpatient treatment center for girls and women with severe anorexia and bulimia, where I spent four long months. That I had struggled with an eating disorder since I was thirteen, and though I was very new to recovery and really scared that I would not be able to do this, I was also discovering, moment by moment, step by step, a new life, a new world, filled with beauty and possibility, love and hope, grace and goodness, and, slowly, I was coming to believe that this mysterious and breathtaking,
hard but holy reality would not simply slip through my fingers. I shared that, though I had been under the intensive care of many therapists, nutritionists, psychiatrists, and other doctors in the last year, deepening my understanding of the personal traumas and family systems that had contributed to my disease, I had also spent a lot of time reflecting on how the wider world tells women to make ourselves small, literally and figuratively. I wanted to help lift that veil for others. I wanted to ease the suffering of others, if I could.

I’m sure every job placement professional in the history of forever would say this was definitely the wrong response to a potential employer’s question. But instead of quickly wrapping things up, Jen said, “me, too,” and shared how anorexia had stolen many years of her life and love and vitality - a story I can share because she eventually shared it in the film – and that she had recovered. And, touching my hand, she told me that I could, too. The following Monday we flew together to her office in L.A. and got to work.

I went into treatment twelve years ago tomorrow, the day after Easter. And, today, as we celebrate Christ’s resurrection, as we celebrate God’s grace and goodness active in the world even now, ushering in new, improbable, impossible beginnings, I’m sharing my good news again, as I have shared it with discernment committees and search committees, family and friends, in big gatherings and quiet conversations. How God breathed new life into a young woman ready to give up, brought people into my life who would listen and laugh and cry and cajole, and gifted me with a life I would never have been so bold as to imagine: a vocation that gives me deep joy, a family that fills my heart to breaking with love, a community in which to grow in Christ’s service in the world, together. Because the Easter story is about how Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, and rose from the grave three days later, and it is about how that same story unfolds in each of our lives: in our tombs and our risings, our darkness and our light.

Now it is worth pausing to note that when we talk about God bringing about healing and hope in the world and in our lives, the inevitable next thought does not need to be “why does God allow others to suffer, then?” If you know the Christian story the inevitable next thought is actually to marvel at God’s willingness to suffer with us, in us, alongside us, for so long and through so much, the lengths to which God is willing to go being revealed on Good Friday when Jesus really and truly, in flesh and blood, dies with us and for us on the cross. If the question of suffering troubles you: good. It troubles me, too. It troubles the Church. It troubles God. So if it troubles you, I hope you will come back because Sunday after Sunday, we are wrestling with
This, talking about this, praying about this, and then going out into the world to participate in God’s reconciling love, God’s resurrection life. This is, basically what the Church – at least this Church - is all about.

Jesus “has been raised. He is not here,” the young man says. God has done this great thing in Christ, and will do it in us, too. “He is going ahead of you to Galilee,” the young man says. Jesus is making a way. He is clearing a path. He is showing what might yet be. He is speaking in the young people crying out for gun reform. In every woman saying “me, too.” In every scary act of truth telling. “There you will see him, just as he told you,” the young man says. Because there is no place we can go where God will not find us. No place we can go which is beyond God’s reach. God did not leave Jesus’ body, bruised and broken, behind. God did not deny the past or undo the wounds, but transformed them, redeemed them, and restored what had been dead to life.

The way I see it, there are two ways the women eventually found their voices. Time, of course. They ran scared, ran for their lives, and as they slowly realized a new life awaited them, bigger and more beautiful than they would ever have imagined, their tongues were loosened and their hearts unburdened. That, or the good news just wouldn’t let them be. It kept echoing in their ears. And then Jesus came, assuring them this new reality would not – could not – slip away. And slowly the terror and amazement turned to excitement and wonder, an effervescent enthusiasm bubbling up in them. A giddy hope. A joyful noise. And I tell you what, once they started speaking you couldn’t keep them quiet if you tried.

Whether we prefer the short ending or the longer one, the mystery or the details, the truth is we are still not at the end end of the story of God’s good news. We are discovering it moment by moment, step by step, because we are now a part of Christ’s resurrection, his life, and every time we find our voice, vulnerable and shaky, strong and serious, speaking truth, speaking up, speaking out, this good news is realized over and over again. May we find our breath, our voices, our truth, and have the grace and power to cry boldly, hopefully, courageously, “Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.” Amen.