

“One anothering”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday – April 9, 2023

Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 28:1-10

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Do we believe this? Earthquakes! Angels! Resurrection! We tell this glorious story of salvation every year. In telling it so much, maybe we stop hearing it. Maybe we stop believing it. There’s certainly plenty to object to on scientific grounds, but I suspect something in us rebels against this story because it is so removed from anything most of us have ever experienced. It seems so other worldly, so grand, so untouchable—which is a weird sensation because isn’t that the point of Jesus? That, in him, God becomes touchable. But this—‘Jesus Christ risen from the dead’—it just feels too far away. I mean the world doesn’t exactly feel saved.

I wonder, though, if we’ve told this story so many times that we’ve lost sight of the little details. Let’s zoom in.

Today begins like any other day. Someone deeply loved has died. Three days ago, Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus’ body from the cross, wrapped it in clean linen, and buried his friend. With Joseph are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary—who Mark tells us is Jesus’ mother, his mama. But there wasn’t enough time to complete the ritual of caring for Jesus’ body before the Sabbath began. Now that the Sabbath is over, the women come to the grave. Maybe just to be there. Just to grieve. When Mark tells this story, he says that they come to finish the ritual.

They come to perform something akin to the *Tahara* (tah-HAH-ruh), still practiced among Orthodox Jews to this day. Catherine Madsen explains this ritual in her essay “Love Songs to the Dead.” In this ritual, the volunteers speak the Hebrew name of the one who has died. They wash the body, carefully, meticulously, in warm water. Every part of the body is gently cleaned. The hair is combed. The toenails and fingernails are clipped. Madsen says that “at this point the body is treated almost as if it were still alive, as if it could feel warm water, as if it could feel shame; only the part being washed is uncovered to view.” Then, the body is washed again, this time with cold water. There is no embalming, no preservation. The oils and perfumes are just to bestow love on the body, which is then dried and wrapped in the clothing of a high priest of the Temple.

At one point, they sing to the body, and as Thomas Long explains, “the words they sing from the Song of Songs are a sacred love song, which the indignity of death cannot silence.” The two Marys would have stood there, singing to Jesus, “His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as raven. His eyes are like doves beside springs of water... His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh... His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His speech is most sweet... This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem” (Song of Songs 5:11-16).¹

You see, the men, they still don’t get it. They still think this is a story about glory and power. Jesus died. He failed. They are hiding and disappointed. The women, though, I think they get it:

¹ *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Thomas G. Long

this is a very human story of a man who loved his people even to the point of death, and who in that death is owed the little things that grant dignity and grace. For, he spent his life humbly doing just that: the little miracles that disrupted a hard and cruel world and inserted a moment, a gift, of being valued. He washed their feet. He kissed the people deemed unclean. He touched the sick. He shared bread with them. He forgave the ones who thought their crimes unforgivable. He saw into their hearts and proclaimed them children of God.

It's so easy to feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world. It gets to where you think you can't do anything. The pain, the injustice, the sickness, the poverty, the violence, they're all just too big. Death is too big. Shame and hate and sadness are too big. We can't seem to find God in all this mess, and so, like the disciples, we hide.

But here the Gospel invites us to refocus on something Linda Russell mentioned at a ministry team meeting: the little acts of one anothering, the ways in which we care for one another.

Linda was referencing a Greek word, ἀλλήλων (al-LAY-loan), meaning “one another,” which appears more than 60 times in the New Testament. The command “Love one another” appears 15 times.² We're told to “wash one another's feet” (John 13:14), “teach one another” (Rom. 15:14, Col. 3:16), “serve one another” (Gal. 5:13), “forgive one another” (Eph. 4:32), “sing to one another” (Eph. 5:19), “encourage one another” (1 Thes. 4:18, 5:11, Heb. 3:13, 10:25), “pray for one another” (James 5:16), and “offer hospitality to one another” (1 Pet. 4:9).

The women show up at the tomb to care for Jesus' body—a little thing that won't bring Jesus back from the dead, won't overthrow Rome, won't overcome sin or poverty—just what they can do. And the moment they show up with their small act of love, God bursts onto the scene in a big way. Only then do we get the earthquake and the angel and the resurrection. God takes care of the big stuff—in the context of the little stuff.

And suddenly this story feels a lot more touchable.

Though the angel has already shared the message with the women and sent them on their way, Jesus decides that that isn't enough. He meets them. And what's the first thing they do? They touch his feet. They touch the place where he was wounded, the place Thomas will touch. They touch their friend, their son. He tells them not to be afraid.

This Christ isn't a superhero, or a Greek god, or a Platonic idea. He's a guy walking in the dirt, tasting the warmth of bread. He dies like anyone else. And what's given back to us isn't the superhero, or the Greek god, or the Platonic idea. What's given back to us is a person who eats and touches, who whispers “Peace” and still bears the scars where they hurt him.

You might think that someone risen from the dead would have better, bigger things to do. But for Jesus, what was most important was to sit down with his disciples and eat with them. He eats with his disciples on the road to Emmaus; he eats with his disciples in the upper room; he eats with the disciples on the shoreline—the “Lord of all” sitting on a beach eating breakfast.

² John 13:34, 35; 15:12, 17; Rom. 13:8; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Peter 3:8, 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 3:23, 4:7, 4:11, 4:12; 2 John 5

That's the miracle: life as we know it redeemed. We show up with our little acts of one anothering, and God shows up too, infusing this ordinary, painful existence with meaning and purpose, with hope and beauty, with life everlasting. Suddenly, every moment of every day, Jesus is here beside us—all heaven is here beside us—not out there, but here, in the everyday things and people of life, which are in truth miracles of God.

All our faith—Communion, baptism, worship, mission, fellowship—is about meeting God in the ordinary. There is power in dust, redemption in bread, love in a cup, dignity in hands touching, life in water.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the Reverend John Ames writes a letter to his young son. And in this letter he remembers stopping on his way to church one morning to watch a young couple walking ahead of him. He writes, "The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it. My list of regrets may seem unusual, but who can know that they are, really. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it."

Jesus Christ wasn't resurrected to take us away from this world. He was resurrected to take us deeper into this world, into the little opportunities to love and bless one another, because God is in the blessing, in the one anothering.

Should you dare to show up as the women did that morning, to do what you can with what you little have, to care for another, to notice the moment, to grab hold of a branch and let loose a bucket of rain, should you do this, I think you too may feel earthquakes and witness the rising of God and life and those you hold dear. I know that these actions and moments seem so small, so insignificant, measured against the pain and severity of the world, and yet they sing: a plate of cookies, warm out of the oven; arms wrapped around you in a hug that lingers; the first flowers of spring, shared with a friend; a person looking you in the eyes and saying something they appreciate about you; a crinkled card in the mail, hand-written; a casket draped with white linen; a blanket knit with prayer, delivered to a hospital; feet walking in protest of an injustice; a few drops of water on the forehead, in the sign of a cross.

They sing an Easter song, "a sacred love song, which the indignity of death cannot silence... 'This is my beloved and this is my friend'."

In all these little acts of one anothering, let us say, with conviction, "He is risen!" **Amen.**