

“The real you”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday—April 12, 2020

Jeremiah 31:1-6 and John 20:1-18

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Our world has changed in recent weeks. Coronavirus has given us much to fear, but one concern has risen above all others: What about the Easter Bunny? Will he still come if we're social distancing? And it's at that moment that you realize people really have their priorities in the right place. It goes: sickness, toilet paper, death... CHOCOLATE.

(Ugh, it is a lot harder telling jokes when you have no congregation to respond. Maybe I need one of those 90s sitcom laugh tracks! **PLAY LAUGH TRACK.** That's better.)

Thankfully, we have been reassured that the Easter Bunny is still in business. New Zealand has included the Easter Bunny in an official government list of essential employees. And they're not the only ones. In Australia, an anxious nine-year-old received a personally signed letter, which said, "Special Eggs-emption for travel into and within Western Australia: I, Mark McGowan, Premier of West Australia, hereby authorize The Easter Bunny to travel freely into and throughout the State of Western Australia for the essential service of Egg delivery." Not to be topped, the Governor of Montana Steve Bullock released an official statement permitting free travel not only to the Easter Bunny but to all "magical entities" including elves, unicorns, friendly dragons (as opposed, I guess, to the mean ones), and the Tooth Fairy. They are allowed to visit homes for magical purposes as long as they maintain a six-foot distance, and provided they leave behind a gift, such as eggs, chocolates, or "the fair market value of a baby tooth."

But my favorite response is a letter from a five-year-old girl in Kentucky, who wrote a note to the Easter Bunny, saying: "Dear Easter Bunny, You can leave my basket on the porch, since you might have the virus. P.S. Don't poop on the porch. Love, Kelci."

All I want now is a remake (you know, another one) of "Miracle on 34th Street", except this time it's not Santa whose sanity and identity are being questioned; it's the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. There's a big to-do about this guy who thinks he's a bunny who hops around the world, delivering eggs in baskets, and this gal who thinks she's a pixie who visits children late at night alone in their beds. All until the big court scene when the lawyer dumps a bag of official government documents from governors and world leaders proving the government's acknowledgment of the existence of both the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Copyright 2020; you better not steal my idea. Hollywood, here I come!

In all seriousness, though, when little girls write letters to the Easter Bunny, telling him to stay away, you know something fundamental has changed. Whether it's the vacant restaurants, the absent funerals, the empty churches, the hospitals running out of supplies, or the hoarding of food, there's a sense of something lost. And we wonder: can we get it back?

As the disciples gather on Easter morning, they're wondering the same thing. Jesus is dead. The movement is down to a few fishermen and day laborers; everyone else has fled. Mary is a mother without a child. Peter, the rock of the church, has denied Jesus. Judas, their brother in

faith, has betrayed them all. The skies didn't open up; God didn't come down in a blaze of light and save Jesus; there's no kingdom of God; there's just more death, more Roman tyranny, more religious hypocrisy. And amid it all is Mary Magdalene. Mary, the believer. Mary, the strong. Mary, who refused to abandon Jesus when all his other disciples did. Mary, who stood at the foot of the cross, who believed even then. Mary, the indomitable—even Mary feels lost. She comes to the tomb, afraid. And when she finds the tomb empty, she doesn't think "resurrection"; she thinks: "Of course! It wasn't enough that they killed Jesus. They had to steal his body too." Mary, the cynical.

We've been there. You start out with these dreams about what life's going to be, who you're going to be, and then one day you're looking in the mirror and you're not sure what happened. It's like you're not you anymore. The world's changed you in ways you don't like—made you meaner, more cautious, more materialistic, more stressed, less imaginative, less fun, less kind. It's been ages since you read a good novel, or hiked in the woods, or worshiped God with all your heart. Ages since you've said, with all your being, "I love you"—ages since you believed that love was enough.

In the sci-fi Netflix hit "Stranger Things," this is Billy... once a sweet kid, now a bully and a womanizer. In the third season—and yes, spoilers alert—Billy becomes more than that, though. He is taken over by a monster, who controls Billy's actions. People die because of him.

Then it's the final episode, and the monster is winning. The world is turning to death and chaos. Billy stands over El, this girl with supernatural powers. She's defeated, her powers gone, except one: memory. She has been in Billy's mind, and she's seen that he wasn't always this way. He was different once, before his father hurt him, before his mother left him. And there on the edge of the world falling apart, El speaks a memory. She whispers, "Seven feet... You told her the wave was seven feet." Billy's suddenly a boy, laughing, on the beach, with his mother. "You ran to her," says El. "On the beach. There were seagulls. She wore a hat with a blue ribbon, a long dress with a blue and red flower, and yellow sandals covered in sand. She was pretty. She was really pretty. And you... you were happy."

Everyone is fighting. They're waging a battle they cannot win. But it's El, who's lying on the ground, in tears, reminding a bully of the boy he once was, it's she who saves them all—with a memory. Billy remembers. He stands up. He faces the monster. It doesn't control him anymore. He gives his life for El. He's that boy again, on the beach, riding the waves, dashing into the light, before it all went dark. And I think of that quote from Rainer Maria Rilke: "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

On that Easter morning when dragons fill the sky, and everything seems lost, Jesus doesn't simply rise from the dead—as if that weren't enough. He takes those dragons—those Billies, those scattered disciples, those crucifiers, those us—and loves them... loves them right into resurrection. He restores them to themselves. Peter is forgiven and becomes the disciple he was always meant to be. Mary hears Jesus call her by name, and once again she is the believer, the indomitable, the first to preach the good news. In the next chapter of John, Jesus will meet more disciples on a beach and will remind them—as El reminded Billy—of the moment when he first saw them and chose to call them to be fishers of men. He reminds them of who they are. Not a beast, not a dragon, but a holy child of God.

I think this is what resurrection means. It's not just that we come back to life, that we get eternal life, that we don't really die. It's that God reminds us of who we really are, of who God made us to be, of who God is, and restores us. God finds that boy on the beach, that disciple who walked with Jesus, and rolls away the tomb of this world (and all its hurt, and all its lies, and all it's made us become, and all it's taken from us), and resurrects the true us. Not just for heaven—but for this life.

What would your moments be? For me, it's the first time I held Emerson, the first time he called me "Daddy." It's going to the zoo with my Mom, getting ice cream, and I'm flat on the ground, nose to nose with a red-beaked bird. It's taking Jenna by the hand in the living room of my apartment and dancing with her for the first time. It's the hospital where I held Ezra and Leo. It's holding my Dad as we cry, after my Mom died. It's the first Interfaith Pride Service in our sanctuary. It's so many moments with you, my parishioners. Real moments of God and truth, when I was me.

When you think about it, there are so many of those moments for each of us. And we can experience resurrection right now by allowing God to remember us to ourselves, by naming those moments and thanking them. It's more than nostalgia. Because when we remember those moments, maybe we're a little better at finding new moments, a little better at being our true selves. It's those moments that will see us "act, just once, with beauty and courage."

My question is: does this resurrection apply not only to individuals, but to communities as well? We as a community teeter between amazing acts of selflessness and disturbing acts of selfishness. We are bitterly divided, unable to love, see, and fight for one another. I wonder: Can the resurrection of Jesus remind our nation, our world, of its real self, of the community we were meant to be? A people who take care of each other, who protect the vulnerable, who value truth and integrity, who strive for the best in all of us, who serve God.

Right now, God is finding in each of us that little boy or girl that we were meant to be, before all the mud piled on and we lost ourselves. Right now, God is going through our memories, just like El (El is a Hebrew word, by the way, meaning "God"... Elohim... El Shaddai... Immanu-el, God with us). Right now, this Easter day, God is finding the true memories capable of reminding us of who we are. God is whispering in our ear, telling that story, and if we listen, we can be that boy or girl or nation, again. **Amen.**