

Great Vigil of Easter March 31, 2018

Open Door

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ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!

We started out early in the morning, when it was still dark, as the sun would not be up for at least an hour. We were embarking for a destination we had not yet been, and wanted to make sure we had plenty of time to reach the town of Athens, Ohio in time for me to celebrate at the 8:00 service that November morning because I was going to be serving as your supply priest for the day. Since my husband, who was driving, can be easily swayed into taking what I like to call “unintentional detours” we left a good 20 minutes earlier than we needed to, just in case one of those detours would spring up.

It was a beautiful drive; since it was so early there weren’t many other vehicles on the road, and then there was this magical moment when the sky changed from a dark milky gray to a very pale gray and then an even more delicate shade of yellowish white and we saw what looked to us to be impressive hills outlined on the horizon. As the sky brightened and we could see more detail in the horizon, leading us deeper into those hills, our spirits lifted. By the time we arrived in Athens, the sky was that clear brilliant blue, and we had no problem finding our way to the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd.

However, we had arrived much earlier than we had anticipated, so early the neighborhood was still quiet, not a soul was around. That didn’t stop us from jumping out of the car after the 2 and a half hour drive, and stretch our legs by walking around the building to look and see if we could find an open door. We didn’t. None of the doors we tried were open. All were locked. Turns out we were better at checking directions to get here than we were about making sure someone would meet us at a certain time to open the door. However, we are not easily discouraged, my family and I, we knew someone would be along eventually, so we got back into our car to wait. Even though we didn’t see any cars after some time, we tried again. This time we found a student sitting on the steps of the church, he was also waiting for the church doors to open, and since they were still locked, we invited him to wait in our car with us and we had a nice conversation getting to know each other. Finally, the senior warden arrived and let us in. Allyn did a wonderful job opening the door because he did more than just turn a key in a lock. With unbridled enthusiasm he eagerly showed

us this very sanctuary, and the moment we stepped inside this sacred space, we were instantly bathed with light. None of you can ever know how healing that light was for us. For it wasn't just sunlight streaming through these windows that touched us. Because that light touched you all that day too.

Although none of us knew it at the time, that one day I served as your supply priest was really the beginning of a new relationship of parish and priest, it was a resurrection moment, even though we didn't find a church door opened for us the way the women we just heard about in tonight's Gospel who went to the tomb Jesus had been buried in another early morning so much longer ago, found the doorway wide open when they arrived. We also heard they were not anticipating an open door, but a decidedly closed door, as evidenced by the question they asked as they walked along carrying the spices they had purchased to finish taking care of the body of the dead Jesus. If you remember from Sunday's Passion reading, these women were mentioned as following Jesus and providing for his ministry. That probably means they were more than benefactors, but benefactors nonetheless.

It's important to pay attention to these women, what they were carrying, and the question they asked along the way. They were carrying spices for burial, these were not cheap, no one gave that stuff away. Although the pictures we've seen depicting these women show them carrying little containers, they were probably larger containers, as burial traditions called for fairly large quantities of those spices, enough for the entire body, which means they would have spent a lot of money on them. And I don't believe anyone would spend that kind of money if they didn't anticipate using those spices. The women sort of remind me of my family and me because they had obviously planned one part of their intention well: obtaining the spices, but they had not given any thought to who would open the door, or in this case, roll away the great big heavy stone blocking the entrance to the tomb for them. As I understand how these tombs worked from archeological evidence, the entrances were sealed with a large stone chiseled into a roundish shape that fit into a track, so it could be rolled aside to open the tomb and rolled back to close it. These stones were large and heavy, and it is believed it took at least two full grown men to roll the stone back and forth on its track. So, the women might have asking if they thought themselves strong enough to move that big stone by themselves.

We also have to remember that tonight we are hearing from Mark's Gospel, and in Mark's Gospel there were no guards posted at the tomb and no seal placed upon it. So, the women really were anticipating being the only ones at the tomb that morning. In other words, these women were carrying the stuff of the dead wondering how they were going to access their dead friend whose body was in a place where

you put dead people. They were not happily going to meet their risen lord, they were doing the last good thing, the last act of love they could for someone they had followed and provided for, by providing the proper rituals for burial.

That's important because they were expecting death. Nothing else. When arrived at the tomb, perhaps still wondering how to handle the challenge of a closed door, they found the very last thing they had expected: an open door.

An open door that led to an angelic messenger who told them the news they had not expected to hear: Jesus has been raised, is not there, and has gone on ahead to Galilee, and the women were given the task to tell the other disciples about Jesus' resurrection. Scholars tell us this account is very much like other visits by angels to people in the Old Testament, so the women and the disciples and we the listeners can recognize this is God at work, this is how God responded to the crucifixion of Jesus.

Then we heard the women left and at first were so frightened they didn't say a word. Which is sort of funny because back in Mark's Gospel after Jesus did something incredible like heal someone Jesus always commanded the disciples and witnesses to keep quiet, but that never happened. People talked and word about Jesus spread, even though it apparently wasn't the word he wanted to spread about him. Now, after he was raised, the women were too afraid to tell about his resurrection, and were quiet. It seems people can't seem to help themselves, they can't seem to help failing to do what Jesus or what God wanted them to do.

And tonight, here in Mark's Gospel, that is GOOD NEWS. Really. It is. Because the women did not have to figure out a way to roll away that stone. That stone was already removed when they got there, proving that Jesus resurrection happened without human intervention or participation. Nothing anyone did caused Jesus to rise from the dead. No one even believed it was going to happen.

Which means Jesus isn't a fairy or some fantasy of our invention who needs our belief in order to be real or to survive. Jesus really is who he said he is, who God said Jesus is: God's Son, the beloved. And God raised Jesus from the dead. Even though his own follower turned him in to the authorities who were afraid of him. Even though his own disciples ran away when Jesus was arrested. Even though his trial was a farce. Even though the most powerful government of antiquity executed him. Even though the women who were given the command to tell others about his resurrection failed to do so, at least at first. Even though we human beings cannot seem to help being afraid. Even though no one believed. God didn't need us to raise Jesus from the dead. Instead, God responded to the door humanity closed by opening it and opening it wide.

This wide-open door revealed something about God I don't think anyone was anticipating and I believe we still find hard to understand and believe today: that God loves us. Despite our tendency to fear. Or our tendency to be easily swayed by those unintentional detours, spiritual and otherwise. God just loves us. To me the women's reaction to the message of the angel shows how so many people often respond to unconditional love: they are afraid of it. Maybe because such love is impossible to control or manipulate, and opens the way for deeper, growing relationships. Such love calls for vulnerability, sometimes calls for suffering through tragic or difficult or uncomfortable times and doesn't always have all the answers. In my life and in my ministry, I have seen so many people throw away happiness and because they were afraid of such love. These folks just seemed terrified of being in love with a love that they cannot control or manipulate or try to force toward the destination they wanted.

While there have been those who lament that Mark's Gospel is lacking in joyful resurrection appearances between Jesus and his followers, making the ending sort of anticlimactic, perhaps the author of Mark had another intention: to lift up the good news that God's love isn't dependent on us, it is instead an invitation for us to accept, or reject. Either way, our acceptance or rejection isn't powerful enough to stop what Mark calls the imperishable proclamation we who are here tonight have just joyfully announced with bells and alleluias and music: that Jesus risen.

The good news is nothing we do, nothing we believe, nothing we fear, nor the time we live in, nor the area we live in, nor the country we live in, nothing can ever silence that proclamation, and that truth. So, when we hear talk that the church is dying, or Christianity itself is already dead, or whatever despairing remarks are flying around out there, we don't have to look any further than the tomb with its door open wide to realize that times may change, people may change, ideas may change, leaders may change, institutions may change, but one thing won't: Jesus' Resurrection.

Which is why I am so proud of the way we continue to open our doors wide to our neighbors, by opening our chapel during the week, by sharing our building with students and other groups, and now the café ministry we are starting which I hope and pray helps even more people see the love of God we aim to show and share and can point us back to that first open door that proclaimed:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!