

“Easter: Reclaiming Muchness” The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
April 4, 2010 Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)

LUKE 23: 50-24:10 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

THIS PAST FRIDAY I was in a foul mood. It was pouring rain. And it was cold. My back and neck were hurting, my sinuses were under attack. And I had committed to the Tenderloin Stations of the Cross.

I was late, I misplaced the reading I’d been assigned, I showed up, but grumbling all the way. And then, the third block into the walk, I remembered why I do this every year. Yes I was uncomfortable and inconvenienced, but I wasn’t unhappy because of those resentments I was nursing; I was unhappy because it was Good Friday. I remembered that it is okay to be sad and upset on Good Friday.

Sometimes I get so involved in the logistics of church work that I forget how deeply my faith really holds me and affects me. It sneaks up on me and I realized that this was Good Friday and I was in the Tenderloin because Christ was sacrificed, and killed, and suffered at our hands. And we are doing it to people still. I was in the Tenderloin precisely to get out of my comfort zone, to get into a more Christ centered zone, to remind myself that I may be in the world, but I do not have to be of the world. My personal discomfort was both irrelevant, and appropriate. In that moment I reclaimed a part of my reality that I forget, that I am embarrassed about.. I really do believe this Holy Week stuff and I get to be sad and grumpy on Friday. And I get to be jubilant and whole and happy on Sunday! Because Christ has died, Christ has risen, and God in Christ is with us always. Christ has risen indeed! The death and resurrection cycle renewed my muchness.

Yes, muchness. It’s a great word, isn’t it? I heard it in the new Alice in Wonderland movie. Alice, having fallen down the rabbit hole a second time, years after her first adventure, is no longer a child. . On the cusp of adulthood, she’s not happy with the options she’s been given in life.

She is no longer sure of what she wants, she uncertain about what she should do, or what she could do. She is less bold, less confident. She is -so much less herself that the March Hare and the Mad Hatter are sure that she's The Wrong Alice. "You were so much more, muchier then," the Hatter says, looking sad. "You've lost your muchness."

"You've lost your muchness." It happens doesn't it? As we get older and are exposed to the push and pull of life, we begin to lose our muchness. We're supposed to tamp it down, lest we be judged uncool, lest we be judged improper, lest we be judged too much, or perhaps too little. Losing your muchness is losing your ability to dream, to believe, to risk, to rest in mystery. Losing your muchness is dwelling in your self-centeredness and thought process at the expense of your creative trust and faith. Muchness offers delight and belief and hope – the ability to risk. Your muchness is your wholeness, your identity as a child of God, ever loved and ever held.

Believe it or not, this muchness is a scriptural word. When Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, reiterating the commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and strength, the Hebrew "me'od" translated as strength, means, literally, "muchness." Jesus says to love God with "all your muchness". All your God-given authenticity and uniqueness, all your passion and talents, all your willingness and all your surrender. All your wonderful, unfathomable muchness.

The women had muchness. They discovered the empty tomb and they ran to the others. Can you picture them running wildly from the tomb where they had been startled by two men coming out of thin air in dazzling clothes? Running, running, till their hearts were pounding in their heads to tell the others the words that were screaming in their ears "He is not here, but has risen!" They run through whatever path, forest, dirt road you can conjure up in your imaginations and they stumble into whatever room you can imagine, startling the men just as the angels had startled them and probably just as dazzling in their insane energy and the words spill out He is not here, but has risen and the words spill out into Nothingness. They were squashed. All their muchness meant nothing. Luke tells us that the women's sharing of the Good News seemed to the disciples to be "an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

What a change-up the Gospel writer Luke gives to the story. The other gospels have versions of Mary alone, or Mary and the other women, running to tell the disciples that they have seen the Lord. Sometimes it is an angel who has spoken to the women and sometimes its Jesus disguised as the 'gardener' But nonetheless, the message gets through. The disciples believe the women and the story goes on. But in Luke, there is this odd twist. They don't believe the messenger. And it would seem the message has died there in that room, as dust falling to the floor.

And yet, here is the lynch pin to the whole story. Peter, the leader of the group, for whatever God-given reason, at some point and we're not told when or how he did it, gets up and leaves the room and RUNS to the tomb. What is this? I thought they all said they didn't believe the words of the women. Did he jump up so quickly that the chair he was sitting in fall over?

Did he throw open the door so violently that it banged the wall? Or did he quietly slip out the back door lest any of his buddies see that he might possibly believe the women after the men had so categorically rejected their words as 'idle thoughts'? Obviously, in his mind, doubt has cast its shadow of suspicion, and Peter isn't so much doubting the women's message now as the men's decision to reject it. And his mind and body are galvanized by one word, Maybe.....

And we run with Peter in our own thoughts, back down the path, through the forest, past the garden and to the tomb. And as Peter runs just ahead of us, leading the way, do we find ourselves also wanting to peer over his shoulder as he comes to a halt, huffing and puffing, sweat forming on his brow, to see for OURSELVES if what we've heard is real?

We're here this morning because we believe, albeit in different ways and hues and styles and speeds but we believe in essentially the same thing. That there is a greater love in this world than ours. That there is a greater Spiritual presence in this world than ours. That there is life after death. That there is hope after despair. That there is light in the greatest darkness.

Not only do we believe, we long to run with the women. At least I do. I long for that discovery, that joy, that affirmation, that surprise. I long for that exuberant and absolute authenticity, without worrying what anyone else thinks.

The poet Rilke said, "Who is this Christ, who interferes in everything?" We want Jesus, his example and ethical teachings to interfere more, not less in our lives, at least I do. . I want Jesus to interfere more in our Church and in the world. I want him to interfere with our struggles to love ourselves, God and each other. I want him to interfere when we cling to interpretations of Scripture or church dogma that support our prejudice which hurts others, or when we refuse to see each person as God's child, as neighbor.

I want Jesus and his example to help all of us learn how to live in our bodies and spirits, at the same time

I want all this, because Jesus comes back from the grave to tell us that we don't know everything, that God's love will always have the last word, and that I – and each of you – am and is much more than we think we are.

We are much more lovely and loveable,
Much more intuitive and instinctive
Much more tolerant and forgiving
Much more valuable and full of wisdom
Much more beautiful and handsome and capable
Much more

Than we think we are.

Against all odds on Friday I felt better for having walked in the Tenderloin, I felt better for having made witness, for remembering the sorrow, for looking at today's sorrow..

This is what I think the resurrection message is –letting go of the secular measures of achieving success and wholeness– and accepting the audacious mystery of God with us, without having to understand it.

In a moment we will gather here, at this table. This table is a way of feasting together and remembering holy muchness and extravagant love — the lavish love of God for us, the magnanimous love of Jesus for the world and our love for God and for each other. May we truly celebrate that extravagant love, that lavish generosity, those abundant blessings. May we delight and rejoice in the muchness of God and the muchness of ourselves. Amen.