

Out of Control

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
April 20, 2014 Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

About ten years ago, we planted two dogwood trees in our backyard. We looked forward to the beautiful white blossoms that would appear about this time of year – Easter. The first spring, there were plenty of leaves, but not blossoms. Second year...no blossoms; third year...no blossoms, and so it went year after year – plenty of leaves, not a single white flower. A few years ago, I wanted to cut them down and replace them, but was advised to wait and see. So I waited. Last year, a few blossoms appeared and this year, over a decade since we planted those trees, both are covered with white blossoms. Finally, blossoms where there had been none before. It leads me to wonder...would our dogwood trees be a good metaphor for Easter – new blossoms where there had been nothing before, new life when we least expected it? Again, a good metaphor for Easter...or is it? Or is my dogwood illustration a bit too calm, too normal, too natural, too controlled to serve as a metaphor for something that is as wild, as unnatural, as unexpected, as out of control as Easter?

Reflecting on Easter, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has written, “Easter is the most thunderous moment in the whole year. There is an explosive power and beauty in it, a thunderstorm hidden in it that nobody has warned us about. Easter is such a huge event that even the churches can’t cope with it. So we’ve scaled it down to fit our little minds. We turn it into fluffy rabbits and chocolate eggs... Easter isn’t just about you and me and our present spiritual experience or our hope beyond the grave. Easter is about nothing less than the re-creation of the world, indeed the beginning of God’s new world.” Makes my dogwood illustration seem just a bit lame. But of course, lame certainly is easier to handle, easier to deal with, a lot safer and more comfortable than resurrection, new life.

In our text, at the moment when Mary realizes that she is not talking to the gardener but to the risen Lord, Jesus says to her, “Do not hold on to me.” It seems a peculiar thing to say since there is no evidence she was holding on to him in any way. Maybe it was because she called him, “Teacher,” the old name she used to call him. Maybe he could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice, the desire to go back to the way we were, to the life where everything was comfortable and familiar and not frightening like it was now, in front of an empty tomb. Jesus of Nazareth was dead. You ask the soldiers, he was dead. You ask his friends, he was dead. You ask his closest followers, he was dead. You ask his mother, he was dead. It was sad, it was hard, but it was something Mary Magdalene could deal with. Visit the grave, grieve his death, but what was done was done. That was the way of the world and everyone knew it.

Ah, but to expect to find a sealed tomb and instead find one filled with angels; to hunt the past and discover a new future, to expect death and find new life...well, now what are you going to do? Suddenly it is an entirely new day, a whole new life. And honestly, I’m not sure I’m ready for this. I’m so comfortable with the way things are, even with old patterns that no longer bring me life. At least I know what to expect from them. But Easter?

Charlie Brown meets Lucy. He is carrying a piece of paper, and is surprisingly upbeat for him. He says, “You are going to be proud of me, Lucy. I’ve decided that this next year is going to be my year of decision. This is a list of things in my life that I’m going to correct. I’m going to be a better person!”

Lucy answers, “Not me. I’m going to spend this whole year regretting the past. It’s the only way, Charlie Brown. I’m going to cry over spilt milk, and sigh over lost loves. It’s a lot easier. It’s too hard to improve. I tried it once, it drove me crazy. Forget the future is my motto. Instead, regret the past. Why did I do this? Why did I do that? Why? I regret it all!” (she sounds a lot like my Norwegian relatives in Wisconsin, especially on a Sunday after the Packers have lost!) Lucy then walks away reciting a litany of regret: “Oh, what regrets, oh what remorse, oh what anguish...” Charlie Brown watches her leave, looks at his list of hopes and dreams, tosses it on the ground and just sighs.

But Lucy has a point. The old world of regret, despair and death is so much easier. We know it, we know how to deal with it, but what are we going to do with an empty tomb? It’s way out of control, beyond our expectations, beyond our rational explanations, beyond our ability to manage. Because of Easter we have now entered a world where nothing is certain anymore, not

even death. We are now invited to interpret our story in the light of our Easter hope, in the light of One who has risen out of our disappointments and failures and fears.

A pastor shares this story: “The week after Easter I was talking with a troubled soul, a member of our church. He asked me, ‘Preacher, do you really think that I can ever get a grip on my addiction to heroin?’ I almost responded, ‘No, almost no one ever gets that monkey completely off his back. I don’t really think you can beat this.’ But then I remembered that we were in the season immediately after Easter, that time when the church keeps insisting that we tell the story of the resurrection of Christ as our story, as a truthful account of what is really going on in the world. So I responded, ‘You know, if this were just about you or even the two of us working together, the answer is no, you can’t get better. Fortunately, in the afterglow of Easter, this is about God, about God’s determination to free you and to give you the life God intends for you. Now that Jesus is risen, Jesus is alive, there is always hope for us.’”

Today I want to proclaim to you that there is a truth bigger than human understanding, bigger than human reason, a truth that transcends our ability to understand, a truth that flies in the face of the reality we experience and read about in the daily newspaper or online. There is a reality more real than the harshness and finality of death.

Now the world that calls itself the “real” world, thinks what I have just said is totally off the wall. A number of you might think that what I just said is totally off the wall. “C’mon, Gene, join the rest of us in the real world – a world where a hate-filled man shoots and kills a grandfather and his fourteen-year-old grandson outside a Jewish community center in Kansas, a world where a truck crosses a center divide and hits a bus carrying a load of students dreaming of better lives, a world where militants in Nigeria or Boston blow up innocent people, and the sad litany goes on and on...we live in a world which seems to do all it can to make a mockery of our Easter hope. Enough of this talk of hope and life, of new beginnings springing forth from every ending....get real. But that is precisely what I thought I was doing this Easter morning...being real – speaking the truth.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke before the Lincoln Memorial and gave his never-to-be-forgotten “I Have a Dream” speech, it was a rather dark and perilous and not particularly hopeful time for the civil rights movement in America. Things were not going well. Had momentum been lost? The march on Washington was meant to infuse new life into the movement, to give new energy so that the people might fight on, despite the obstacles, despite the power and resistance of the “real” world. How to do that? King gave the assembled throng a vision, spoke to them of a dream, a dream of a world in which all would be treated as beloved children of God.

Was it only wishful thinking? Was he totally off the wall? Was it just a fanciful speech and nothing more, a speech which, considering the harsh realities of the world, sounded rather ridiculous? Well, no. His speech pointed toward a new world breaking in, a new reality present even now, yet not totally available. He invited people to join him in that new reality, he gave people a dream to keep them moving, to keep them hoping; a song to sing in the present darkness which dared to affirm a new, in-breaking light, a vision which, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, dared to see a new world a-comin’.

And that really is what today is all about. I confess to you that today I am doing nothing less than trying to convert you; inviting you to allow our risen Lord to pry your fingers loose, one by one, from their firm grip on the world as it is, indeed to allow him to throw your assumptions of what is real into complete disarray, that you then might embrace a whole new world, a new definition of what is normal. I know, there is absolutely nothing sensible about Easter. But I am going to guess that it might be that the “nonsense” of Easter is just what we need. We need it because the sensible world, the real world, has left a lot of us dissatisfied and hungry. We come here, not just because that is what one does on Easter, but because we yearn for a glimpse of something new, a reality that pulses just beyond the border of our everyday existence. We are here to discover a truthful account of what is really going on in the world.

And that truth is this: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb....” I can’t explain it, I’m not sure I can make any sense out of it, but this I do know: By the light of this day, God has planted a seed of life in each of us that cannot be killed. And if we can remember that truth, dare to believe it, dare to live it, then there is nothing we cannot do – move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.