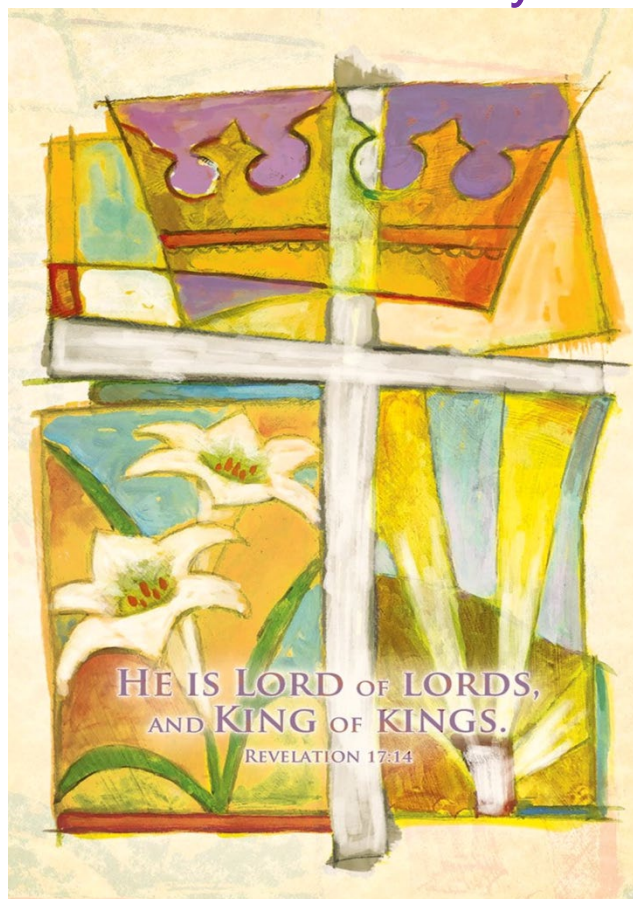


Stones Rolled Away



Luke 24:1-12

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In 1921 Thomas Lynn Bradford put an ad into a Detroit newspaper saying, "I am seeking proof for life after death. If you can help me to prove this, please contact me." One person contacted him, a spiritualist and psychic named Ruth Morgan. She met with Thomas Lynn Bradford, and they agreed on a plan to prove that there is life after death. The proof revolved around having one of them die, and then seeing if that person can contact the other from the other side. That night, Thomas went back to his apartment, turned on the gas lamps and oven, but without lighting them, and went to sleep. His landlord found his body the next morning, along with dozens of typewritten pages detailing his plan to contact Ruth Morgan. The story soon spread, and the NY Times and the Detroit papers followed this story...including the following days, when Ruth Morgan reported back. She responded that the next day, she had heard nothing. The following day the same. After three days, the NY Times wrote, "Spiritualist hears nothing from the grave."

Silence can be devastating. When we hear nothing, we feel loss and pain, grief floods in. We end up in the garden weeping, facing a stone blocking our path, with no word, no clue, no hope. We shelve our desires for a better life, and close down our dreams. But what we hear this morning is that Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary heard and saw something! As they trudged in tears to the spot where her teacher was buried, they were astounded to see the enormous stone blocking the tomb had been rolled away! Angels greeted them in an empty grave. Their lives were suddenly restored, and their community of love, caring and sharing reclaimed! On Easter we find the possibility of a turn-around, a rush of good news, hope vindicated, life transformed from deep grief into sudden joy. Alleluia!

But before they arrived the women who gathered at the tomb must have assumed that their hope was lost, that their time as followers and disciples was over. They had been freed from inner demons, and had experienced first-hand the astounding community of faith that had sprung up around Jesus. In that community they had found acceptance, healing, and equality. In their gatherings all were welcome, even slaves, outcasts and strangers were treated with respect, along with the disabled and very poor. People shared all they had; no one resorted to violence or brutality, as often happened outside.

After the crucifixion they assumed, all of that was over and gone. It was a momentary blip, a short-lived dream. Now they would return to a life of fear and deprivation, callous disregard and cold-hearted indifference. Now they would have to struggle to eat and to defend themselves from the powerful who would steal from or abuse them. They would have to shut off any hope for a better life. The warmth, the sharing, the compassionate caring of those in the community around Jesus would evaporated like wisps of dew in harsh sunlight.

Many of us in our day are facing grief, fear, and lack of hope, as our world is experiencing upheaval and change. We have seen a shift toward dominance and division, where power and wealth seem to be the only values, eclipsing values of mutuality, equality, and compassion. A huge stone seems to be shutting out light. To protect ourselves we form a hard shell of indifference, cynicism, and mistrust around ourselves, with only self-interest as a motivator. Hope seems lost.

The biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, teaches about Easter in terms of the early Christian community, that seemed destined to be destroyed after the crucifixion and persecution. Jesus preached the "Kingdom of God," God's upside-down justice and compassion that allows people to give freely, to love the unlovable, to welcome strangers, to offer healing, and to live at peace with one another. Christians expected that after the Roman crackdown and the crucifixion of Jesus, all of this would be

destroyed, snuffed out. Astoundingly, the kin-dom continued; it survived and flourished throughout the Empire in small house churches and hidden gatherings of Christians who shared 'agape' meals and cared for each other's sick and gave to the poor. They felt the spirit of Jesus present with them, even though he had been so cruelly executed. Christ was present to them as loving Spirit and holy truth. The Spirit of Christ lives on with us when we fashion the Kin-dom of God in our churches. Jesus laid down his life so that all of us, every one of us can be saved, included, and transformed; brought into the light and joy of holy love and reconciliation.

Hope does not die. Communities of faith like ours can be renewed and rise again. Stones are rolled away, doors open, light pours forth in sharing, in welcome, in empathy, unity, and compassion. In Christ we rise. Like Jesus, we return to the fullness and the wonder of God. And if there is anything Jesus teaches us, this is the most important. Love does not die. Love is renewed again and again in open arms and joyful reunion. Risen indeed!

In 2012 the poet Mary Oliver wrote a poem about the devastation of Hurricane Irene that inundated her seaside village and home on Cape Cod. But more importantly her poem is about the desolation and brokenness she felt after the death of her life partner, Anne Taylor. Those two storms almost broke her, but this poem also speaks of the surprising restoration that can come after the hurricane of grief, after *'the back of the hand to everything.'*

She writes....

*It didn't behave like anything you had ever imagined.
The wind tore at the trees, the rain fell for days slant and hard.
The back of the hand to everything.
I watched the trees bow and their leaves fall
and crawl back into the earth, as though, that was that.
This was one hurricane I lived through,
the other one was of a different sort, and
lasted longer. Then, I felt my own leaves giving up and
falling. The back of the hand to everything.
But listen now to what happened to the actual trees;
toward the end of that summer
they pushed new leaves from their stubbed limbs.
It was the wrong season, yes, but they couldn't stop.
They looked like telephone poles and didn't care.
And after the leaves came blossoms.
For some things there are no wrong seasons.
Which is what I dream of for me.*

This is what Jesus dreams of for each of us: leaves and blossoms that return after storms and devastation; stones rolling from doorways, contentment and inner joy sprouting again in our souls after loss and grief, after illness or tragedy. By offering life in love on the cross, Jesus opens pathways of healing and hope, holy joy in families, among friends, in our towns, our nation, and in Christian community. Love does not die, but lives on in open hands, clear eyes, and kind, radiant hearts. Happy Easter! Christ has risen! Amen.