

“Making a new path”

- Living in rural Arkansas as a teenager had some advantages
 - We were surrounded by fields and trees, us kids could roam without a lot of fear
 - And there were ample places to ride a 4-wheeler
 - And my brother and I rode the wheels off of this poor ATV that my dad had bought, exploring every country road and trail we could find
 - There came one moment when we realized that it would be really really neat to create some trails of our own
 - We could make a new path, a new trail, through the fields and woods near the house
 - And our parents would not worry as much because we would be closer to home while riding
 - So my brother and I set out to make a new trail that would connect two other trails, and give us a loop around the house so to speak
 - Out came the hand saws, and even the machete, and we began removing small pine trees that were in our way
 - And chopping low growth grass and weeds
 - And we pushed a new path that completely encircled our house
 - And we rode it until those tire ruts were smooth
 - I look back on that now, as a parent myself, and I am not sure I would let my sons use a machete to chop down some small trees
 - But we sure did have a good time that summer
 - Making new paths, new trails, new ways forward when before it was blocked
 - Perhaps this memory came to mind this past week for several reasons
 - If you are like me, you watched with horrified amusement as that gigantic ship the Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal
 - It seemed every news outlet was on the edge of its seat as finally it broke free and opened the canal once more
 - They moved 30,000 cubic meters of mud and sand to free that ship
 - That’s 8 million gallons to make a new path for that ship to get out of the muck
 - Both of these examples make it into this sermon, however, because for me Easter, is God doing a lot like that

- Making a new path, a new way forward even when we are stuck or there is no trail
- For Jesus in that tomb... And for you and me here this morning.
- For the next life, and for the one we are currently living
- Today marks the moment when God showed the whole world that God is in the business of making new trails
 - When before there were only stuck, dead ends
- This morning we hear the account of this game-changing event from the Gospel of John
 - John's gospel was the last one of the four written, and as such the community has had 20-40 years to think about what happened that morning
 - And what it means to them, so you get a fuller and much more theological gospel than say the gospel of Mark
 - But by the time John was written, we are about 70 years after Christ's crucifixion,
 - And that community of believers are still there for one reason
 - And this is it. This is *the* good news, the reason Christianity began and exists, the reason someone wrote down these gospels
 - The reason we are here, and that the church exists today
 - As my former bishop in Arkansas once shared in a sermon, resurrection is the only real good news we have¹
 - John records Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb alone that first morning while it was still dark
 - Other gospel accounts tell us she was coming to anoint the body, but John keeps it simple- Mary simply came to the tomb.
 - She comes to the tomb in the midst of unspeakable darkness and grief.
 - She finds that the grave has been disturbed, the stone rolled away, and she assumes the worst
 - That someone had come during the night to steal the body
 - I bet she suspected Pilate, or maybe the Pharisees, either way this was not good
 - Likely another effort to crush the Jesus movement and further humiliate him and his followers
- She ran to get help- Simon Peter, and another disciple identified as only "the one Jesus loved," ran with her to see for themselves

¹ The Rt. Rev. Larry Benfield, Bishop of Arkansas, Convention sermon 2015

- There has been a lot of speculation about which one this might have been, many believe it was John, since this is his gospel
 - A literary cameo, if you will
- But I think we are better suited to see this unnamed disciple as an invitation for you and me today to join Mary at that tomb²
 - To be a part of this story
- After all, Jesus loved each disciple, as Jesus loves each of us
- There you and I are with this group of disciples- we all run to that tomb together this morning in shock
- We see the stone moved, we look inside, and it is true- Jesus is no where to be seen
- But something is out of place- the wrappings are still there, and the one for the head is rolled up separately
- No grave robber would have taken the time, nor would have wanted, to unwrap a decaying body³
- That takes time, and would not have been a pleasant task at all
- No, this was not grave robbery, this was something else, something miraculous and impossible
- The disciples believed- it is so simple in John's Gospel... they see and they believe
- And run to tell the others what they've seen
- To tell them Jesus was right- that God did not leave him in the tomb, but resurrected him, denying death, continuing creation
- Saying once and for all that it is the way of Love that overcomes, not the way of violence, jealousy, and power
- You have probably heard me say this before at Easter, but for me so much power comes in seeing this moment as a part of God's ongoing work
 - Thinking about this as the first day of the "second week" of creation
 - Remember back in Genesis, God created the heavens and earth in six days, and rested on the seventh
 - But that's not the end of the creating: it is on Easter Day that God resumed God's efforts- began creating again

² PulpitFiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easterb>, April 4, 2021 episode

³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 2, 379

- In this gospel, Mary first arrived while it was still dark⁴- that is, before there was light.
- And I imagine God saying “let there be light” once more, but this time instead of in the sky
- God is kindling the divine light in our hearts.
- It’s the second “big bang” when hope breaks forth, the dead-end gives way
- Creating a path to salvation for us where there was no path before
- A way for us to live in God’s love rather than God’s judgment
- God has begun creating again, improving creation, undoing the sin and the hurt that has found its way into our world
- It does not happen quickly or instantly
- But the hope and the faith that we have as Easter people, as Christians following a risen Lord
- Is that God is indeed creating and making all things new again, and we are a part of that.
- There is no tomb that can withstand this divine work
- Mary came looking for something that day, but she was not expecting a miracle
 - She came with her grief looking for a way forward with her life after everything she had and knew was taken away
 - She came already knowing what she would find- a body in a tomb, dead along with her faith and her hope
 - But instead Mary found something she never imagined that day- an *empty* tomb
 - A tomb that has room for possibility and hope because God made sure Jesus didn’t stay in there
 - A tomb that reminds us of God’s never ending love and work with us and creation
 - That God has not given up on us, and although it will take time, God is remaking creating into something better
 - A world where death no longer has the final word, and hope can prevail
 - Raising Jesus from the dead and emptying that tomb was God’s response to Good Friday
 - Jesus hung on that cross and said, “It is Finished.” And today God says, “Not yet.”

⁴ PulpitFiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easterb>, April 4, 2021 episode

- There's more to come, more to find, more to hope for and have faith in
- God is making new ways, new paths forward, new ways out of situations that seem hopeless
- Even the most hopeless situation we can imagine- a tomb- still not the end.
- God, out of God's very being of love, constantly pours hope and a never-ending supply of possibility and potential in to you and me
 - And this world that God loves beyond measure
- Richard Rohr writes in his email meditations this week, that resurrection is not a one-time miracle that happened 2000 years ago
- But a divine, universal pattern that was simply proven, or illustrated, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ⁵
- A pattern God has been following forever, and that we can trust will continue.
- You and I get to join Mary Magdalene this morning as beloved disciples at a time when we too can identify a lot of tombs- a lot of dead ends
 - Can't we?
 - We know what hopelessness feels like, we know what insurmountable problems look like
 - We see them all around
 - We see gun violence go unchecked, taking more and more lives of innocent people
 - We see racism and sexism continue to be underlying motivation for all kinds of unspeakable acts of evil
 - All around we see the mental and emotional effects of a year long pandemic: depression, anxiety, grief
 - We see the COVID death toll climb
 - We know about tombs, don't we?
 - But this morning we see something else.
 - This morning, we get to join Mary Magdalene as the disciples beloved by Jesus himself, and we discover a tomb that is unlike the others
 - This tomb is full- not of a body, but of life and hope.
 - New paths being formed.
 - God wants us to be a part of this re-creating- to join the Kingdom of God, the way of love

⁵ <https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/00954086ADD88D892540EF23F30FEDED/94559016179953939780B6D0B3F3FC10>

- If there is ever a time for some good news it is today- that God refuses to give up even when we do not see a way forward
- That God overcame death and the grave for you and me
- And God is working to overcome all of the other dead-end situations that we can see
- And if there is ever a time when we need to hear that nothing is impossible with God, I need to hear it now
- Resurrection is God's creative solution to the dead-end of the tomb⁶
- And Resurrection is God's promise for me and you today
- It is our good news
- With God, there is always a way, always a next chapter, always a path forward through all of the challenges we face.
- The tomb is an open door inviting us all into God's ongoing work
- Easter, resurrection, means that God's great cleanup of the world has begun, but God will not complete it without us⁷
- Let's leave here this morning with this gospel, this resurrection good news, in our hearts and in our lives
- And ready to go and make some new paths.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia

Amen.

⁶ <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/160-easter-c-march-27-2016>

⁷ Borg, Marcus J.; Crossan, John Dominic (2009-03-17). The Last Week (Kindle Locations 3132-3133). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.