

***A sermon given on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019 – Easter Sunday – based upon Luke 24:1-12.***

Don't you all look beautiful! You sure do clean up nice. But you don't fool me, because as a pastor I am endowed by God with a certain superpower. Didn't know that, did you?

My superpower is that I have the ability to look inside you more than other ordinary mortals and see that each of you struggle at times with what I call "the temptations of darkness" – in other words, the temptation to despair. Some of you more than others, but all of you know what I'm talking about. I see it in you because I've seen it in myself. It is that part of us that looks to the future and sees little if anything to feel hopeful about.

There is this great irony that we live in a country with a level of material abundance that would have been hard for people in past ages to imagine, and yet, people are taking their own lives at rates never before seen. There is an epidemic of despair. In recent years it has particularly distressing to witness the growing rate with which young people are taking their own lives. I saw a statistic recently that was stunning. Do you know which part of New Jersey has the highest rate in which young people take their own lives? It isn't the poorest or most violent portions of the state. It is right here in what is referred to as the Skylands region – from approximately where we are here in Parsippany extending westward to the Delaware River.

And I know that the real reason we are here today on Easter morning: we're hoping to find the antidote to despair.

So let's consider the story that brings us here.

As you may know, there are four Gospel writers that tell the story of what happened that first Easter morning. There are certain consistencies in their stories.

The first is that they all tell us that it was women – not men — who made the discovery that the tomb was empty, and that these women received a vision of angelic messengers announcing that Jesus wasn't there – that he had risen.

The fact that it is consistently women who made this discovery is striking, because if some kind of early 1<sup>st</sup> century PR team had constructed a story to keep the movement going they wouldn't have had women be the first witnesses to the resurrection. In that particular culture, women's testimony was considered unreliable. For this reason, women weren't allowed to testify in court. In the story you heard this morning you get a taste for this when the male disciples discount the women's testimony as an "idle tale," as in, "You know how women can be."

So there's the ring of authenticity to the fact that it was women who first tell the story.

Here's the second thing that is consistent. Jesus' resurrection wasn't anticipated. The women didn't come to the tomb early on Sunday morning because they thought they might find him alive. They came with spices to properly anoint his decaying body, because time ran out Friday before the Sabbath began for Jesus to be given a proper burial. Contrary to the impression you may have received, the Hebrew Scriptures don't talk about a messiah rising from the dead.

Jesus' resurrection took people by **surprise**.

And here is the third thing that is consistent: None of the Gospels make any attempt to portray exactly how or when Jesus rose from the dead. The Gospel writers respect the mystery at the very center of the resurrection.

Now if you know your Bible, you also know that following the consistency of how the four Gospel writers tell the opening story, they go on to tell distinctly different stories – stories that contradict each other. We might ask, *“On something so important as the resurrection, how come they couldn’t get their stories to line up?”*

Clearly, it didn’t seem to matter to the Gospel writers. They felt some freedom to use their God-inspired imagination to tell different stories and make different points.

They felt this freedom precisely because of their underlying confidence that something truly mysterious and wonderful had happened. They had experienced the power of this mystery to transform their lives. They went from a place of utter despair to a place of boundless hope; from devastating grief to uncontainable joy, from fear to courage and love, and for some, like Peter and the other disciples who had fled, from a place of shame and self-condemnation to a place of inner peace.

To put this in context, during this period of history in ancient Israel there were plenty of would-be messiahs who came and went. For a period of time they would teach and heal and generate a movement with excited anticipation that the liberation of Israel was at hand, only to have these movements disappear with disillusionment – like dust in the wind — with the deaths of these would-be messiahs.

Something altogether different happened with Jesus of Nazareth. Following his death, the lives of his followers were pulled out of the black hole of despair and powerfully transformed in life affirming ways, and their singular explanation was that they had experienced him alive again.

His appearance to them was experienced as a holy mystery that they could never truly understand — never fully express with words. Honoring this mystery, the earliest Christians kept their belief system – their theology – to a bare minimum. To be a Christian was to confess that Jesus of Nazareth was the crucified and risen Lord, and to follow in his way – one of a radical love for all people. Faith didn’t mean having all the answers but rather trusting in the power of this holy mystery to continue to transform lives.

But we human beings like certainty; we like to nail things down. So overtime we felt the need to build boxes in which we hoped to contain this holy and transformative mystery.

It took a while, but over time creeds were developed in order to clarify the major parts of the story in which the great holy mystery had been revealed.

You may have noticed that we don’t recite the ancient, orthodox creeds here in our worship. I know some people find this helpful, but I’ve always had a problem with the creeds. For one thing, it becomes easy to turn faith into something lifeless – the ability to memorize a creed and declare you believe it. Faith as the humble trust in the ongoing power of this great holy mystery to transform lives gets lost. And what if there are parts of the creed that you find hard to believe? Does that leave you out of the circle?

The creeds couldn’t help but declare things that went beyond the great holy mystery witnessed by Jesus’ first followers. For instance, the Nicene Creed was created three hundred years after Jesus’ resurrection and it includes the line: “The third day he rose

again.” Yes, they wanted to make sure we get it that Jesus arose from the dead, but who says it was on the third day? All we really know is that the tomb was discovered empty on the third day. As I said before, exactly when and how it happened is beyond our knowledge.

But we like to build these boxes in an attempt to explain the holy mystery and all its ramifications. But the boxes end up getting in the way of experiencing the mystery.

It was the rock star Bono, a faithful Christian who said, *“Religion can be the enemy of God. It’s often what happens when God, like Elvis, has left the building.”*

Bono’s talking about ultimately empty boxes.

One of those boxes is the belief that occurred only in the last century of the *“inerrancy of Scripture”* – the view that every verse of Scripture was spoken directly from the mouth of God, never to be questioned. With this box the Bible becomes the book with all the answers and all the rules to follow. It becomes the object of faith, rather than the book that points us towards the heart of our faith, the mystery of the Living God.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the brilliant theologian Thomas Aquinas built one of the finest boxes to contain the mystery of God that the world has ever known. Drawing from the philosophy of Aristotle he used his great intellect to write thousands of pages of systematic theology in which he attempted to think through all the implications of faith in Jesus Christ.

In 1273 – three months before his death – while leading mass he had a vision – a vision akin perhaps to the sort given to those women at the tomb. For a few moments the veil was pulled back and he caught a glimpse of the glory of God. Awestruck and humbled by what he had gazed upon, he realized no words could ever adequately contain the great mystery. He refused to write another word, saying to his assistant, *“I have seen things that make my writings like straw.”*

So I want to bring this back to what my pastor super-powers allow me to see — the temptations of darkness – to despair.

There is a sense in which despair itself involves arrogance, because when we are in the state of despair we claim the authority of having surveyed all the possibilities the future holds and judged them devoid of anything to be hopeful about. Despair claims the knowledge that belongs only to God.

We live in a time of epidemic despair, and this I believe is connected to the fact that our culture doesn’t give us much encouragement to seek out the great holy mystery that is the antidote to despair – that same mystery whose nature is love encountered by those women at the empty tomb. Often it seems we are given a choice between two opposing paths. On one side is a world view of materialism and atheism, one that believes that everything can be reduced to molecules, and all that really matters in life is physical health and material abundance. On the other side are various forms of religious fundamentalism, boxes of belief that require our unquestioning assent.

Our souls are not hungry for ever increasing material prosperity, nor are they hungry for the apparent certainty that comes with rigid boxes of belief – boxes which, when examined closely become unhinged.

Our souls are hungry for meaning, and it is in encounters with the great mystery whose nature is love that meaning is found. Those women running from the tomb with their

message of hope to the male disciples are a portrait of people captured by a higher purpose and meaning to their lives.

So I conclude today by inviting you to be open to holy surprises in those places where the temptations of darkness hold sway in your life. The story that brings us here this morning involves women and men who loved Jesus so deeply that they had pinned all their hope on him, leaving all to follow him to Jerusalem. When he was crucified they had as much reason as anybody ever had to despair – to say farewell to hope. The wonder of the story is that they were delivered from the cavern of their despair, and this happened through their encounter with the holy mystery of Christ's living presence. The faith has endured through the ages because the possibility of such an encounter persists to this day, and at the heart of this mystery is a love greater than death. The living presence of the risen one continues to bring good things – things beyond our capacity to imagine in the present moment – out of situations that seem hopeless.

So try as best you can to keep an open heart and an open mind to the holy surprises the mysterious living God is waiting to spring upon you as you travel through life. Give yourself space to connect with the great Mystery of God's love that brings life where once there was only death. There is a meaning God bestows upon our lives when we embrace the calling to be a vessel of God's wondrous love.

In the end, despair does not win. God's love wins.