

**Message for April 9, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
“The Wilderness is the Birthplace of Joy” Rev. Trish Eckert**

Bible Wisdom Teachings

- John 20: 1-18
- Psalm 46

How grateful I've been for the rich images and metaphors that have come out of our Wilderness theme this Lenten season! We have arrived at what we've been anticipating: Easter Sunday - and it has me wondering, what do we do when we come out of the wilderness? Do we return to the way things were? Or do we hold on to the hope that this transformation might last? That whatever we experienced in the wilderness might continue to change us?

It can be easier to preach, lead worship, even simply practice our faith in the “special” seasons of the year. Advent anticipation, Christmas traditions, and Lenten disciplines guide us and keep us on track, but we rarely celebrate the full fifty days of Easter, the season of Eastertide, and there isn't really anything to center us during Ordinary Time. How do we hold the energy, instead of dropping off and going back to our “normal” lives?

Maybe it is as simple as continuing to show up. John's account of Jesus' resurrection shows two different responses to the empty tomb. After the initial shock of fear, hope, and confusion that brought them all to the tomb in the first place, Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the other disciple stood looking at the linen cloths abandoned in the tomb. But Mary Magdalene was the first to witness the resurrection because she was the one who stayed. Peter and the other disciple went home—back to business as usual for them. But Mary stayed. Whether it was from grief or hope, Mary Magdalene stayed by the tomb, weeping, and was the first to see Jesus. The first to undergo that transformation from grief to joy. Because she stayed. She illustrates for us what our opening blessing poem revealed: that “The Wilderness is the Birthplace of Joy.”

Perhaps the way to hold on to what we have learned in these forty days is to continue to show up each day, hoping for a resurrection. This hope can feel fragile and tender.

Throughout this Holy Week I reflected on all of the Bible Wisdom teachings – the stories, history, theology - and paid attention to all the feelings that rise up, ranging from the lowest lows to the highest highs. Some years I seem better able to take in the messages, to track my feelings, to absorb the lessons; other years I struggle to track it all, to make sense of any of it, to take in the miracle and walk the path of hope – to recognize the joy. Some Easter Sundays, when we're rejoicing and singing and celebrating, I kind of have a sort of hangover of sadness, a lingering grief – feelings of dread and emptiness – I get caught up in Mary's experience - seeing the stone removed from the tomb, a sign that maybe the tomb had been raided, the fear that Jesus' body had been taken away, and then again the pain of all she had witnessed - Jesus' crucifixion burned into her brain.

Even though we hear, every year, the stories of Jesus' journey; of all that his disciples and the crowds, and his beloved family and friends and followers experienced, and did and said; even though we know that after all of the horrifying things that happen, we are on the path of resurrection, we sometimes get caught in the pain and the brokenness – all that is around us that is not resolved, is not renewed, is not repaired.

So I'm grateful for today's Psalm, which emphasizes the words that we sang together throughout Lent – “Be Still.” Each week we sang, “Be Still My Soul,” and this morning the psalmist reminds us that in our stillness, we come to know God more fully. The author and theologian, Walter Bruggemann observes, “This psalm is a crucial one, given our cultural situation of dismay and anxiety. The disappearance of old structures and signals of cultural order causes us to experience the world as falling apart. A keen sense of God's powerful protective presence (of whatever constitutes our precious ‘Jerusalem’) permits us to experience and embrace even that disorder with freedom and equanimity. Much may fall apart, but we are not finally in jeopardy. God is faithful, God is present, God is powerful. Nothing else matters in the face of that sure reality.”

I find that like Mary, I need that comfort this morning – a reminder that God is our help, our protector, our comforter, our strength, destroyer, creator – on this day, we are faced with Jesus' essential paradox – that to lose is to gain and to die is to live. Just as the psalmist reminds us that God is ever-present and repairs all things, we see that through this divine paradox of desolation and creation, death and resurrection, there can be no compassion without passion, no responsive loving-kindness unless there

first comes suffering. Until God ultimately mends all of creation's broken pieces, there will be suffering.

There is so much to consider here – Easter is filled with promise and mystery. Through the centuries, Christians have centered their faith on the empty tomb. As modern people, who like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, we sometimes forget that the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be as difficult for these ancient people to believe as it is for us. These ancient people were not stupid. They had seen many people die and didn't see them come to life again.

Understandably, elements of the story might raise doubt in us. There is also another way to put it: there is something in the story that reaches the deepest regions of our hearts and minds, where both doubt and faith are found. That is, in the resurrection God gave us such a miracle of love and forgiveness that it is worthy of faith, and thus open to doubt. The very doubts we may hold attest to the scale and power of what we proclaim. So the place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things we never doubt.

Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us. So we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.

This week as I revisited the territory that we've covered throughout Lent together, I turned to the writings of Cynthia Bourgeault, who is considered by many to be a modern day mystic. She is an Episcopal priest, and writer, and an internationally acclaimed retreat leader. Her observations point a path through the wilderness that Jesus walked as well as the wilderness journeys that each of us experience.

She notes, *“The passion is really the mystery of all mysteries, the heart of the Christian faith experience. By the word ‘passion’ here we mean the events which end Jesus’s earthly life: his betrayal, trial, execution on a cross, and death....*

So much bad, manipulative, guilt-inducing theology has been based on it that it’s fair to wonder whether there is any hope of starting afresh. I believe wisdom does open up that possibility. The key lies in ... reading

Jesus's life as a sacrament: a sacred mystery whose real purpose is not to arouse empathy but to create empowerment. In other words, Jesus is not particularly interested in increasing either your guilt or your devotion, but rather, in deepening your personal capacity to make the passage into unitive life....

[Jesus] certainly lived in a very intense way the ordeals of betrayal, abandonment, homelessness, and death. Did it have to be like that? If he were indeed here on a divine mission, it would seem that he could have been given an easier career path: chief priest, political leader, the Messiah that people expected him to be.... But none of these opportunities materialized. Why not? Because the path he did walk is precisely the one that would most fully unleash the transformative power of his teaching. It both modeled and consecrated the eye of the needle that each one of us must personally pass through in order to accomplish the "one thing necessary" here, according to his teaching: to die to self. I am not talking about literal crucifixion, of course, but I am talking about the literal laying down of our 'life,' at least as we usually recognize it. Our only truly essential human task here, Jesus teaches, is to grow beyond the survival instincts of the animal brain and egoic operating system into the joy and generosity of full human personhood. His mission was to show us how to do this."

Cynthia Bourgeault's wisdom brings me back to the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus there at the garden tomb — how at the sound of her name, Mary's weeping gives way to seeing, to recognition, to the astounding joy of resurrection.

I imagine that Mary would want to linger here, to stay and savor this miracle of reunion and return. But we know that Jesus asks something other of her. Though this may be a garden, this is not a place to put down roots. It is a place of calling, of consecration, of sending, as Jesus urges the Magdalene to go and tell what she has seen.

Mary has to choose whether she wants this calling, this consecration; she has to decide whether she truly wants to be sent from this place. I feel a catch in my own chest in this moment of decision, this threshold that will change everything from here.

This day, this empty tomb: this has been our destination all this time. But we see, with Mary Magdalene, that this is not a place to stop. This is not the end toward which we have been traveling. This is the beginning.

As Mary leaves to tell the disciples, filled with shock and breathless joy, she begins a new journey. Her personal wilderness blooms with beauty and promise. /As Easter people, the journey for us never ends. With the Spirit luring us forward, we celebrate the glimpses of resurrection sprouting up in the dry and cracked spaces of our lives.

For Mary's willingness to let go, to step into her new life, and to proclaim what she has seen, she becomes known (at least in some quarters) as the "apostle to the apostles." Whatever may have become of her beyond Easter morning, John's Gospel clearly tells us that it was to her that the risen Christ first revealed himself, and she was the one he called to carry the news that everything had changed.

On the threshold of this Easter morning, what is the good news that the risen Christ calls you to proclaim?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Is there anything you need to release, in order to acknowledge what you have seen?

What are you called to share with the world?

What have you learned from your time in the wilderness?