

Recognising resurrection now

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 16 April 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter A

Jeremiah 31:1-6; John 20: 1-18;

Contemporary Reading: “Life before death” by Dorothee Soelle

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

John chapter 20 tells the resurrection story like a movie scene: vivid details, gripping suspense and powerful human emotions. Mary, in great sadness, comes to the garden, not to care for Jesus’ body, as the women do in the other Gospels, but to guard his memory. There she finds the stone has been moved away from the tomb and Jesus’ body is gone.

She hurries back to Peter, and to the disciple Jesus loved, to report what she has seen. The two disciples set off in a rather bizarre running race. They saw what Mary had seen, and then they went home. The narrative then returns to Mary, broken again in grief, as she had been at the cross. Looking into the tomb, she addresses the angels, seeking to know where Jesus’ body has been taken. Speaking to a man she assumes to be the gardener, she asks again.

Jesus answers her by calling her by name. The sound of her name touches her inwardly, deeply, profoundly... She knows him, not abstractly or intellectually, but viscerally, emotionally, intimately. The moment of recognition is deeply, deeply personal.

For contemporary western Christians who struggle with understanding resurrection, the story of Mary and Jesus in the garden reminds us that we are not asked to grasp this intellectually but physically and emotionally. Jesus does not explain himself – or explain what happened - to Mary. Rather he uses a word that applies to her and her alone, a word that captures the utter particularity of her individual life—her name.

Like Mary, we long to be known by the Sacred—to be held in Divine Presence. We want to be seen for who we are in the most intimate, far-reaching corners of our interior psychic lives, our bodies, our histories, our dreams and our losses.

When Jesus says, “Mary,” his words travel toward the innermost places in her. Similarly, when she speaks to us through her story, grace travels into the innermost places in our lives. And when these words hit home there, in that name space, John's Gospel tells us that Christ is made known, that God’s dream is made known, again.

It was a dream of love, amazing love and relationship, a vision of a new way of being human and a new way of ordering the world for justice for the outsiders and the oppressed.

John’s gospel tells us that despite his death, his violent, tortured death on a cross, Jesus could come to Mary on that Easter morning and entrust to her that dream of love and relationship that is the reign of God. And despite her fear, her memory of the horror of crucifixion, she received the dream and cherished it and carried it on. Today that dream is again entrusted to us.

On that day of resurrection, it was not just that Jesus was alive again. On that day of resurrection, Jesus' friends began to return to life. Jesus' friends were, as we are, participants in the now cosmic Christ, which is so much more than the return of the earthly Jesus. Now in our own life, in our community, we too may know resurrection.

In interpreting Jesus' death, the followers of Jesus were drawing attention to his life. His death mattered to them because his life had mattered to them. They spoke of his death in ways that affirmed his life, and reaffirmed their own commitment to the values and vision stamped into his life by his words and his deeds.

Resurrection was the process of Jesus' friends knowing themselves to be known and loved by God, and so empowered by that love that they would hold and live out Jesus' vision of the reign of God.

And if this vision was indeed God's, then the bearer of the vision was not dead. No executioner could kill what he was. To kill Jesus, you would have to kill the vision. This the cross could not do.

I want to tell you another resurrection story. In April 1993, at Yamaguchi University, in Japan, a flower bloomed. A magnolia. What made this flower so special was that it grew from a seed 2,300 years old. The seed had been found 11 years earlier in an ancient tomb near Hiroshima. Three centuries before the birth of Jesus, it had been gathered by people and buried in the tomb.

Professor Hiroshi Utsonomiya soaked it in water, sowed it with loving care, and nature took its course. The seed sprouted and grew, and became a tree more than two metres tall. A year and a half later, in the autumn, it grew several buds, and the following April one of them flowered, a delicate white bloom with eight petals, each six centimetres long and two centimetres wide.

Through centuries of waiting in the tomb this small brown seed held on to its secret of life, keeping its genetic code intact against the uncertainty of the ages. No seed had ever been known to survive for so long and then yield its astonishing and mysterious gift of life.

That seed survived the millennia, despite the passage of time and the rise and fall of civilizations. The actions of human beings, and the effects of wind and water and sunlight upon the earth for hundreds of years, had not disturbed the seed lying quietly, waiting in the darkened tomb. The seed was forgotten by humankind, but not forgotten by creation itself. It still carried the potential to become a flowering magnolia.

That little seed is full of mystery for us because we don't know everything there is to know. It is a miracle because we cannot completely understand it. It amazes us in its complexity, but it does not defy nature's laws. Mystery that it is, the resurrection of the seed was in keeping with the order of things. The seed hung on because it had not yet fulfilled its mission. The code for its blossoming and for its reproduction and the means of survival as a species remained packed into that small seed, unfinished, ready, waiting.

Waiting for the gardener who would gently act to release the power of life.

In the John's resurrection story, we are told that Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener. Jesus was a gardener of his own soul. He had a mission to fulfil as a prophet of a new reign of love and justice, mercy and forgiveness, on earth. Even after his death, the spirit of his life and teachings have continued to flower, and have planted their seeds in human consciousness.

Like Jesus we too must be gardeners of the soul. If you are alive, then your work on earth is not finished. There is a seed waiting in the tomb of your buried consciousness, waiting to flower in beauty and in fragile power.

Our resurrection is a journey inward and outward; inward to the ancient longing for love hemmed in by fear and disappointment, hurt and anger. Our resurrection is a journey outward to the claim of love and compassion that others have on us.

Somewhere we learn that love isn't love until you give it away. We learn this in relationship. We learn it when we choose to become part of a spiritual community that asks us to risk faith and hope and love in relationship with one another and in covenanted mission to a world in need.

The community of Pitt Street Uniting Church hasn't endured for quite a long as that seed; but it has endured for over 180 years and has been a source of spiritual resurrection and renewal for many people past and present. For Easters still to come, we will be the gardeners of the soul of this gathered community.

There are no guarantees in living and learning and loving. There will be more hurts and disappointments along the way, but there is no end to the human longing for love, and as long as we draw the breath of life we have this mission to fulfil.

We cannot forget this as the violence and injustice of the world and its conflicts weigh heavily upon us. As we celebrate Easter - even while naming Nauru and Manus Island, Egypt, Syria and Afghanistan – and all the broken war-torn places of our world, our continuing mission is to bring love and justice to life within ourselves and within the world as far as we are able.

The gospel promise is that the seed will blossom. When you rise above your fear and despair, the seed will blossom.

In all the tragedy that surrounds us: choose to act, to agitate for change, and to work for justice. In touch with your own divine essence, break through the shell of fear that keeps you from blossoming into sensual, earthy humanity.

Resurrection is all around us, and in us,
if we will but hear it
.....calling us by name.

Wherever our humanity is shared,
wherever we live in just relationship
with the earth and with its creatures...

resurrection is here and now.