

EASTER REFLECTIONS BY REV. PEGGY MCDONAGH APRIL 12, 2020

INTRODUCTION

All around us, yet somewhat invisible, creation moves through the slow quiet process of renewal. Winter slowly bends in homage to springtime's nudge. On this day we are aware of the energy and movement in creation as spring begins to greet us.

Lured by spring's light and warmth the robin's song announces and welcomes dawn's light, and a bright sun heats the day more quickly. Soon the sun's energy will emerge through tulips, daffodils, new buds on trees, and dawning possibilities. And although we do not know what lies ahead and despite life's immediate challenges, springtime trembles within the ground and in our hearts as we anticipate warming days, blooming trees, and colorful new birth.

The spirit of resurrection is strong and apparent in the melting, the emerging, the endings and beginnings of spring.

HYMN In the Bulb There is a Flower vs. 1 & 2

POEM Mary's Easter Prayer by Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

REFLECTION I Easter is about endings. . .

After the crucifixion of Jesus by the ruling government, his closest followers faced a difficult ending because everything they had come to value and love about their relationship with Jesus, ended. The concreteness, safety and security of their relationships and their faith in his message of hope, all now lost within the clouds of despair. Endings are difficult.

While Mary and the disciples grieved the end of their mentor and teacher's life, what was most fearful, and disconcerting was the ending of what they had experienced with Jesus. They grieved the loss of the way he valued them when others diminished them. They mourned the end of God's love that he showered upon them, in a world in which the righteous reserved God's love for themselves. Most of all, they grieved the end of Jesus' vision for a world shaped by justice and compassion; a world starkly different from the existing oppressive and unjust powers. Their hearts longed for Jesus' unwavering determination to manifest God's value and love for all people.

Endings are difficult and final: loved ones die, a valued friendship ends, retirement happens, illness replaces health, divorce occurs, people move from beloved homes into long-term care, unemployment replaces jobs and livelihoods. And now, a most unimaginable ending. The ending of life as we have known it and, in its place, insecurity, wondering, restlessness, uncertainty, fear, grief, and loss. Beyond the deep regret and sadness connected with such absences, there is also a part of us that mourns deeply the ending itself; we lament the ending of what was.

Endings change everything, they uproot us. We are not just upset about having to do things differently or to experience life differently, we are mourning the permanence of the life we have come to expect, the life of which we were accustomed and desperately want back. Mary mourned what was gone, the permanence of Jesus, his human self, his aliveness, and warmth. She grieved the ending of Jesus' loving humanity that reassured her that her life mattered and that her existence was important and meaningful.

Endings are an inevitable and natural part of life, even endings we could not have imagined; of this we know and have no ability to alter, but what we can alter is how we respond to the ending. We can react with anger, bitterness, and resentment or we can open ourselves to the power of the resurrection, the new life that awaits us in this ending.

At a place of death, Mary grapples with life. She thinks to herself, 'This ending you have just been through has changed you forever. Can I be in this ending open to what awaits me?' Mary knows that if she clings to her grief and her desire for her previous life, she will be unable to receive her teacher's present spirit. Her encounter in the garden awakened her to an understanding that Jesus' death was not just an ending it was also a new beginning.

MUSIC In the Bulb There is a Flower vs. 3

VU #703

REFLECTION II Resurrection – the birth of new beginnings

Paul, of the ancient Christian world, was a powerful witness to the resurrection of the Christ. For him, the resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse, but it was more than a metaphor. For Paul, the resurrection was a transformative power that he experienced personally and believed wholeheartedly. In his letter to the Ephesian Christians Paul writes, "Christ is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to God's power that is at work within us."

For the early Christians, the festival of Easter was an affirmation of God's power at work within them that enabled them to accomplish more than they could have ever dared to imagine. Out of a devastating ending, awareness grew; the disciples acknowledged that while Jesus had died, his teachings about fairness, equality, and compassion had not. It was Jesus' parables and his demonstration of God's absolute love that became a transformative power of change. The new beginning for the disciples was that they would no longer be followers of Jesus but teachers and spokespersons responsible for keeping Jesus' message alive.

It was Paul who proclaimed this Christ power that brought new life out of death, communion out of profound alienation and hope out of suffering. Easter is about hope. We are living in turbulent times marked by the CoVid-19 virus, unrest, increasing anxiety and depression, loss of faith and community, and lack of security and fear.

People of the world hunger for an encounter with something more significant than the struggles of this upside-down present-day existence. Easter hope affirms that life is greater than this now overwhelming experiences.

American author Suzanne Collins, who wrote *The Hunger Games* trilogy, beautifully describes the hope of spring. "What I need is the dandelion in the spring," she writes. "The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again."

Poet Lilia Royers wrote this about hope.

"First a howling blizzard woke us,
and then the rain came down to soak us:
And now before our eyes can focus, CROCUS!"

Like Mary, there are moments when we can't see beyond our frustration, pain or self-concern, we can't see through the rainstorm, and then we experience the quiet motion of hope, a crocus in the snow. Resurrection is God's 'yes' to life."

Easter invites us to embrace our endings and open our hearts to new beginnings, in so doing to open ourselves to the transformative power of the Christ spirit. What is this Christ power? According to the late Jack Layton it is knowing that "love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair."

I would like to share with you this morning a response that California Methodist Minister Rev. Karen Clark Ristine gave to a question posed to her about whether or not we should cancel Easter and church.

She writes, “Easter is alive in you right now. Easter comes alive in every human connection. Easter comes alive in all our sense, in our very being. The triumphant sounds of brass ensembles, the vibrant Easter flowers in the sanctuary, the cross lifted high, the Christ candle lit to shine through the darkness – Easter lives in these shared experiences and memories. Memories of last Easter. Memories of any Easter we have ever share anywhere with anyone. Memories of that first Easter morning that we share in sacred story every year on Easter Sunday.

Easter lives in our longing now for these experiences. Easter celebrates new life. New life overcomes even our starkest moments. Easter calls us to hope, to hope in one another, to hope in a future we cannot yet see or imagine.”

She continues: “Easter is alive in all the ways we reach out to one another across this social distance. Easter is alive when grandparents video chat story time to grandchildren and alive when youth meet on Instagram to share their highs and lows. Easter lives in every phone call made to connect with someone who lives alone, in the social distancing and sheltering in place and in the new ways we are learning to show love and care for one another. Easter is not canceled, and neither is church.

Church is not a building. The church lives wherever people of faith – any faith – share in love and in hope. The church lives in every social media post of beauty and words of encouragement. The church lives in every text and phone call made to keep connection alive. The church lives in new communication platforms like Zoom and old platforms like ‘phone trees.’

My friends, the transformative message that we celebrate this joyous day is a message as old as the ancient text, that faith, in every religious tradition, assures us that strength and hope are greater than we can imagine and that these powers help us to keep going, one step at a time. Easter invites each of us to be, to be loving, peace-seeking, caring, gentle, patient and optimistic because, guess what? no virus can destroy or cancel human kindness, love, tenacity and faith, if we refuse to let it. Let us be assured that compassion, kindness, love, and hope live now, stirring, vibrating and reverberating around the world.

This Easter Sunday I invite you to listen! Listen to how quietly the earth breathes forth life, how eagerly the sun bleeds forth the spring. The seeds are stirring and making noise. Listen to the seeds within you breaking open, awakening Divine love, compassion, honesty and kindness. Live fully and deeply in all the new ways that we are called to in these times. Welcome the growth that is quietly occurring in the garden of

creation and the growth of patience, hope, love, faith and trust in the garden of your hearts. Amen.