

“Relaying Resurrection”
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18

Every year, I am humbled by the grand task of relaying the glory of resurrection. Humbled because no one sermon can capture it. I feel like Mary, whom Jesus tells after she realizes it is him, in resurrected form, “Do not hold on to me.” If there is nothing to hold on to, how can I relay this amazing story?

And yet, Mary does. She preaches what we could call the first resurrection sermon, and it is just one line: “I have seen the Lord!” 5 words, but enough to relay the point.

Perhaps because Pete Shanno, who has coached high school track and cross country more years of his life than not, is here today as liturgist, I noticed for the first time just how much *running* shows up in John’s gospel version of the resurrection story. Not only that, this telling almost looks like a relay race-- where one person, beginning with Mary, takes the news that the stone has been rolled away. That news is her baton. And Mary *runs* with it, delivering it into the hands of Simon Peter and the other disciple, who is unnamed, but we are told he is the “one whom Jesus loved.” She delivers the news, like a baton, to them, saying, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they laid him.”

So then, Peter and the other disciple, holding this news, RAN to check it out.

The unnamed disciple reached the tomb first. A funny thing: the gospel makes it clear three times that this disciple outran Peter. You can tell who *this* gospel writer’s favorite disciple was. The unnamed disciple bends down, peers into the tomb, but does not go in. He notices the linen wrappings lying there. Peter, right behind him, does not stop at the entry to the tomb. He has to go inside, to really see what is happening. Peter, too, notices the linen wrappings and the other cloth, which had covered Jesus’ head, rolled up in another part of the tomb. Then, it says, the unnamed disciple saw and believed... but it said they did not understand.

Empty clothes tell a story. On Friday my daughter was picking out an outfit to wear on Easter. She had stacked 2 options for outfits, and wanted my opinion for which she should wear. I looked at her choices, and realized I had not seen her in these spring clothes in nearly two years. Kai is a tall 9-year old, and these were size 7 and 8. These were the clothes she would wear when she had special occasions to attend, birthday parties, big family gatherings, church services-- lots of church services. As I gazed at these clothes, memories of those shared moments flooded me. I realized that due to the pandemic, she hasn’t had occasions that have called her to dress up; I haven’t really bought her new clothes beyond what she needs to putz

back and forth between school and home. Kai tried to convince me they could still fit, but I what I saw were leggings which once came to her ankles, now only reach her knees, and what was once a dress, which would now fit more like a shirt. Those Easter clothes have been empty of a child's body probably since two summers ago. Still, their emptiness doesn't mean the body of the one who once occupied them wasn't still experiencing play, worship, growth, connection, joy. For just a moment I held these clothes, and cherished the ghost of the 7-year old who once wore them. But I could not hold her, for that girl's spirit has moved forward, occupying the shape of a healthy and strong 9 year old, whom I am blessed to cherish and love.

There is an art installation at the Canterbury Cathedral in England of empty clothes. It is called "Suspended" by artist Arabella Dorman, who visited the Isle of Lesbos in Greece, where many refugees land hoping for entry into the EU. She saw that all along the beaches, hundreds of articles of clothing and shoes were strewn about. She learned from refugee workers that travelers with hopes of a better life often arrive with wet clothing. On the beach, they are given a set of dry clothes. And so they leave their old clothing behind-- as their journeys are not over, they only carry with them the most essential things. Looking at these items: a t-shirt that says "Mummy's Super Cool Dude," a long, yellow-orange flowing scarf with hand-painted block prints of reds, golds, and browns, a baby onesie with a bib that says "Prince Charming," a jersey announcing the completion of a marathon, sneakers that invite you to imagine the feet that filled them. The thing that breaks your heart open about the exhibit is not knowing: feeling the presence of the bodies which once occupied these clothes, but not knowing what became of them. Yes, these refugees came in search of a better life. But did they find it? Did they even survive? One can only guess, and hope that even with the huge obstacles in their paths, they would find the new life they had hoped for. Seeing the exhibit opens up compassion, which does bring its own kind of hopefulness: for as the viewer is drawn into the experience of the refugee, the value of their lives and enormity of their struggles are made visible in ways that can perhaps inspire positive changes, changes that can relay welcome and mercy.

Sometimes, when we try to relay a message of good news, there are big, heavy stones in the way. In college and in seminary, I was involved in a couple of different prison and jail ministries. Through the Open Door Community, I volunteered to drive an old, beat-up Chevy van once a month two hours away, to Milledgeville, Georgia-- to the big state prison there. My passengers were mostly women and children; mothers, wives, girlfriends, sons, and daughters to those who were incarcerated, catching needed transportation to make monthly visits to those inside the prison. Without fail, each one was dressed in their Sunday finest. Our ritual, when we arrived to the prison grounds, was to circle up and pray: for meaningful connection; for physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of those behind the prison walls; for the Spirit's grace and mercy to work forgiveness in broken relationships; for the chance for those inside to one day experience new, redeemed life on the outside. The first time I drove this van, after our circle prayer, a woman named Veronica wandered back to me only minutes after her cohort of loved ones disappeared into the prison. Her outfit was a white dress suit, cut below the knees, with a matching jacket on top. Even her shoes matched-- white flats. However, it was the shoes, which she had clearly chosen with such care, that caused the warden to roll the stone shut. They were open-toed flats, from which you could catch a glimpse of 2 well-manicured toes;

according to the prison guards, open-toed shoes were not modest enough for visits to a men's prison. So Veronica climbed back into the Chevy van, and we wandered till we found a thrift store, where she bought shoes that did not match at all, but at least they fit, and she was able to see her husband for a very short visit and relay to him her love, her care, news from the land of the living.

In sharing the good news of resurrection, there are going to be small and large obstacles that get in the way of having a story people can hold on to. We have a story that is hard to see. It is hard to believe. And it is hard to understand. Each of those things are hard, and to do all three-- well, even the disciples could not do that. And yet, we are still expected to relay this story as good news.

I read a story about the Japanese relay team at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. The event was the 4x100 meter relay. None on Japan's team were star runners. However, together they won the silver medal, and would have won gold if not for Jamaica's Usain Bolt's spectacular ending. Not one of Japan's 4 runners had ever run 100 meters in under 40 seconds-- yet, together they finished this race in 37.6 seconds. The reason for their success was that they analyzed, and perfected, their baton exchange, and that compensated for their individual, slower running times.

While it seems impossible to relay the big message of resurrection, we can focus on passing other messages that get us closer to resurrection. We can relay the message of mercy and forgiveness, as Jesus did to the bandits crucified beside him, and as Veronica did as she visited her husband with great care, even after he did something dreadfully wrong. We can relay the message of praise. When we live lives of gratitude, it creates a sense of abundance. Yesterday I got a text from someone who took the time to send me a very encouraging and uplifting message, out of the blue. It gave me such joy and energy to make this final lap toward Easter, and made me excited to share abundance with others. We can, like Mary, relay the message of abiding presence, showing someone that you will be beside them, even when they suffer, even when they die. Such presence just might lead to new and unexpected life, maybe for them, maybe for you. In the past couple of weeks, I have seen evidence of Asian American communities partnering with Black communities, acting on the same team rather than competing against each other, together discovering a new life and strength in overcoming oppression. We can relay the message of love. While love-- like the resurrected Christ-- is not something you can hold on to, love IS something that *takes hold of you*. When the grace of that amazing love happens, you know something of what it means to be lifted up. Now that is good news worth sharing! Happy Easter. Thanks be to God.