

WGUMC Easter Sunday March 27, 2016
John 20:1-11 "El Niño Easter"

The weather is beautiful here, but my folks just arrived from Denver where they had 15" of snow a few days ago. No matter where you live, spring weather is always unpredictable, especially in an El Niño year. And with more and more extreme weather events happening around the world, we have pretty regular reminders that the earth's climate is changing.

But it isn't just the geophysical climate that is changing. Our political and economic climate is changing and our religious and cultural climate, too. It's a huge challenge for all of us trying to survive in a time of monumental change. So, it's helpful to know that the Gospels were written during just such a time. The Gospel of John was written a couple of decades after the Jewish revolt in the year 70, a revolt that was brutally crushed by the Roman army. After a thousand years, the southern kingdom of Judah was wiped off the map.

Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was burned. And the Jewish people were dispersed.

The social world of the Jews was shattered, altered beyond recognition. Yet the authors of the Gospels were not concerned about retelling that story. The breaking news that they wanted to share was the good news of Jesus Christ. Though they probably didn't know it at the time, the revolution that Christ brought to the world was much more world-shattering than the one the Romans brought to Palestine. But the Gospels don't just tell the story of Jesus' mission and his martyrdom. If he were just another courageous prophet who killed by the powers-that-be, we wouldn't be. The Christian Church would never have arisen if Jesus Christ hadn't risen.

The resurrection is the foundation of our faith. Without it, there would be no Christian faith. I know that that makes a lot of folks uncomfortable. How can the resurrection be real when there is no scientific evidence for it, when everything we know

about how the world works tells us that the resurrection couldn't work?

Yes, we have our doubts about the resurrection, but according to the Bible, so did the eyewitnesses. The disciples also doubted the resurrection. In fact, their first reaction to almost everything Jesus ever did was disbelief. So we are in good company. Remember, real faith begins in doubt, just as Easter begins in darkness.

In the Gospel of John, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. She saw the stone rolled away, the body gone. So she ran to tell the disciples. Peter and the Beloved Disciple came running to confirm Mary's report. Then the two men went home, but Mary stayed. Peeking into the tomb, she saw two angels sitting there, and when she turned around, she saw someone else. But she didn't recognize Jesus.

Why should she? She had never seen a resurrected body before. Come to think of it, I don't know why we suppose that in the resurrection any of us will be recognizable. In the Apostles' Creed, we say that we believe in the resurrection of the body. But that doesn't necessarily mean that in the resurrection we will have these bodies. (I hope not! I want a better one!) When asked about our resurrection bodies, St. Paul in First Corinthians says: "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable...It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." [I Corinthians 15:42,44]

So whatever body Jesus might had on Easter morning, he didn't look like the old Jesus to Mary. And that gives us some room to imagine and to confess that we can't begin to imagine what the resurrection really is. Still, I am convinced that it really is. Whatever shape it takes, however we understand it, we need the resurrection to be real, because in it lies our only hope that life triumphs over death, goodness over evil, and

love over hate. Paul says, "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death is your sting?...Thanks be to God who gives us
the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." [I Cor 15:55,57]

The people that gathered around the mystery and the
victory of the resurrection gathered in what we call churches
and Paul called these churches the Body of Christ. In one sense,
the church is the resurrected body of Christ. We are the ones
who must give the world the hope that evil and death do not
have the last word.

But with the media predicting the demise of Christianity
every day, we know that churches need resurrection, too. Many
churches these days are empty, at least their physical buildings
are empty. But when we see empty churches we should remind
ourselves that the resurrected body is a spiritual body. Empty
churches, just like empty tombs, don't mean that Jesus is dead
or that faith in him has failed. It simply means that the real

church is someplace else. The Spirit is just doing a new thing in a new place.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that one day it won't matter whether we worship on this mountain or that one, but only that we worship in Spirit and in truth. [John 4] That day has arrived. The Church as the Body of Christ is changing, and we may well wake up one morning and not even recognize it. And that's OK. Some of us may live long enough to see the church shed the buildings we so faithfully built and lovingly care for and we may get to watch as Christ's spiritual body takes on new and unimaginable physical forms. And that's exciting.

The important thing is not to hold on to the old church, the old body. That's what Jesus told Mary. When he spoke her name and she realized that he was Jesus, she must have rushed forward to embrace him, because he said, "Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father and

your Father, to my God and your God." In other words, let me change. Let me become. Let me be for you something different than I have been. Let my life live in you in a new way. Let me lead you in a totally new direction.

Mary is not the only one who needs to let Jesus live in them in a new way. For too long, Jesus has been used and abused by Christians to justify all kinds of attitudes and behaviors that do not lead to life. Jesus has been stripped of his revolutionary message of love and of justice and used as the enforcer of the status quo. Jesus has been tamed and domesticated to the point that he could fit right in with the other family pets.

This is not the Jesus who rose on Easter day. If we want to follow this Jesus, we're going to need some resurrection, too. Let me tell you about the resurrection that I witnessed this Lenten season. As most of you know, we provided shelter for 15 medically fragile homeless women for 35 consecutive

days. They slept in Woodhaven, ate dinner and breakfast in Wesley Room, took showers here, gave their dirty clothes to the laundry fairies, and shopped at our clothes closet in the basement. It was a monumental effort by a whole legion of volunteers. And just to open the doors, we had to move and store furniture, hang drapes, put up shelves, install smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, rent showers and port-a-potties. We literally had to change the physical body of this church so that we could become the spiritual Body of Jesus Christ for our guests.

The truth of this hit home for me one evening at dinner time. I tried to make it most nights just to be present with the women and look for opportunities to remind them that God was present with them, too. It was a Saturday, and I said that I had to leave to go work on a sermon. One woman said, "Oh yea, tomorrow's church." And I said, "No, this is church."

The fact is that more and more people are finding that they experience the resurrected body of Christ by bringing the presence of Christ to others. And that doesn't happen only on Sunday mornings or even usually on Sunday mornings. On Wednesday morning, the last day of the shelter, I was speaking with one of the women at breakfast. She told me she was grateful for everything the volunteers had done and for how safe and welcome she had felt here. Then she told me that she had always thought she could believe in God on her own, until the night of our blessing service when I talked about the church trying to be the Body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ, for the world. She said, "I finally got it. I realized that I need a community to know the love of God. I want to belong to a church like this one."

It's in moments like this, when I look into the face of a homeless woman and see the risen Christ, that I know that the resurrection is real. Is the Christian Church dying? Always, but

only dying so that it can rise again. We all have to do that. We have to die to death, so we can live for life; die to sin and brokenness, so we can live for healing and wholeness, die to hate and fear so we can live for love.

In fact, that's what baptism is all about. In the ritual of baptism, we symbolically die with Christ, so that we can rise with Christ. In baptism, we let go of the old body—our old hurts, fears and failures—everything that is keeping us from rising above the old life and embracing a new one.

Being baptized into the Christian life, professing a faith that is always evolving, joining a church that is always dying and rising, and letting the Spirit lead you on a journey that is always unfolding in new and unimaginable directions takes a lot of courage. If you join this church, you won't find easy answers to your questions. We will try to make it hard for you to keep your kindergarten faith, your domesticated Jesus. We want to challenge you to learn and to grow and to put Easter into

action. As it says on our website, "if you want God to change your life, help us change the world." We are here to make the resurrection real. Would like to join us?