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4/9/23, Easter, John 20:1-18

“Hope in the Dark”

As far as I’m concerned, Easter could not have come at a better time. I consider myself a hopeful person, but lately, the headlines have been making hope for the future a bit more difficult. Today, the headline could not be better. Above the fold, in big thick letters, are the words: Christ is risen!

If the phrase “above the fold” means nothing to you, think of it this way. The words “Christ is risen” are trending. It’s blowing up your handheld device: #emptytomb, #lovewins, #alleluia. For the first followers of Jesus, the resurrection was hope realized.

As much as I love Easter and as much as I try to stay in the moment, there’s one thing that always troubles me as I prepare for Easter Sunday. I think about Monday. The sanctuary never looks better than it does on this day, with the beautiful palms and the colorful flowers. We’re joined by some amazing musicians. Wendell and Terrie and the choir are always at their best. I always love an Easter egg hunt. I’ll be out there as soon as I can. But tomorrow morning, all of this will be behind us.

The problems we had prior to Easter, probably won’t magically disappear. Some of us still have to show up for work or school tomorrow morning, like we do every Monday. The news reports and the headlines will go back to being just as troubling as they ever were. What we need is a way to make the hope we feel, on this day, extend into each and every day. Where do we find hope on Monday?

I think I found an answer to that question while working in my flower beds. I live in the house owned by the church, just across the street. I’ve never been much of a gardener. But, as you know, as a minister, I only work one day a week. So, I got outside and got my hands dirty.

Over the winter, the wind blows the leaves so they collect in certain parts of my flower beds. I decided to clear the leaves in order to allow something to grow in those places. The leaves were so thick and so wet, I couldn’t even rake them. I had to reach down and gather up heavy, dripping handfuls.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that underneath all the brown, heavy muck, green shoots were already making their way up from the earth. I couldn’t believe it. I thought I was making growth possible, but life was already secretly emerging from the darkness under those leaves.

I don’t know if you’re going to agree with this and I could be wrong, but I want to suggest God’s best work is done in secret. It happens in the dark. We know God can do anything, anywhere, at any time. But God’s best work doesn’t tend to take place while people are watching. It takes place in the dark, around the edges, in places like graveyards.

Does anyone remember the time-of-day Jesus died on the cross? It was 3 o’clock in the afternoon. The crucifixion happened in broad daylight, because crucifixion was a public

spectacle. The authorities wanted everyone to see it. Crucifixion was specifically meant to crush the hope of anyone who sought to resist Roman domination.

In fact, they tended to hold crucifixions at the entrance to cities so crosses stood as a warning to visitors of what could happen if they caused trouble. As long as people have hope, they'll fight for their freedom.

There's nothing Vladimir Putin would like more than to crush the hope of the Ukrainian people. Without hope, they wouldn't resist so passionately. The enemy always wants us to believe that it's hopeless. For that reason, crucifixion took place in broad daylight, for all to see.

Writer and historian Rebecca Solnit points out that the acts of the powerful and the official occupy center stage. That is to say, people with wealth and power tend to draw our attention. They become the news story. The crucifixion was Pontius Pilate's moment. But Solnit writes, "Our hope is in the dark around the edges, not the limelight of the center stage."

I was thinking about this the other day. I went to the Portsmouth Music hall to see the show that's playing. During the intermission, I noticed a stagehand came out from behind the set to rearrange some things. My initial response was to wonder, "Where did that guy come from? It was the first I'd seen of anyone other than the actors.

Then, I began to think about all that must take place behind the scenes to make a show possible. Not to downplay the skill it takes to perform in the spotlight, but without all that happens secretly, around the edges, in the darkness, you don't have a performance.

Do you recall the time-of-day John's version of the Easter story began? It began early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. The crucifixion took center stage. It happened for all to see. But God's greatest miracle, the resurrection, took place in the dark. And where did Mary go on that first day of the week? She went to a graveyard. Mary had an encounter with the risen Christ and it happened, around the edges of anyone's awareness.

That seems to be the way God operates. Think about the birth of Jesus. He wasn't born in Jerusalem, the center of religious and political life. He was born in the little town of Bethlehem. That night, Bethlehem was bustling with activity. The inn was full. But where was God active? In the dim light of an animal stable, just beyond the attention of the crowds. Our hope is in the dark around the edges.

That's where human life originates. These days, we're capable of amazing things in terms of conception and birth, but generally speaking, human beings begin secretly, in the darkness and the hiddenness of the womb. Perhaps it's no coincidence that Christ rose to new life from the darkness and the hiddenness of a tomb.

On that first Easter, Jesus told Mary, "Do not hold onto me... But go to my brothers and say to them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Jesus entrusted the most important message in the world to a person who, because of her gender, could

not even testify in a court of law. In the Bible, the men get most of the ink, but for a reason to hope, they'd have to accept the testimony of a woman. Our hope is in the dark around the edges.

Today, we embrace that message, however we want to say it. God's love is stronger than death. Death doesn't get the last word. Martin Luther King, who was killed 55 years ago last Tuesday, put it well. He said, "Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to greater significance.

Today's headline: "Christ is risen!" I feel safe saying tomorrow's headlines won't be so glorious. However, there are reasons for hope. We just won't see them on CNN or Fox News. God's best work doesn't tend to take center stage. Our reasons for hope will be, like green shoots forcing their way up beneath a thick layer of leaves, in the dark and on the edges.

All we have to do is turn our attention. Churches aren't as prominent as they once were, but you all give me hope. It gives me hope when I see folks making prayer shawls to comfort people in crisis. It gives me hope knowing free community meals take place twice monthly in our Fellowship Hall. You know what I say. If it's free, it's for me. It gives me hope when I see how you care for one another and serve the community in ways that nobody else will ever know.

Our reason for hope might not come from the halls of congress, but from youth around the country becoming politically active. Folks in local communities uniting to do small things to live more sustainably is a reason for hope. All the ordinary people doing small things to make this world more beautiful, more just, and more peaceful is what gives me hope.

God always provides a reason for hope. You just have to know where to look.