Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

St. Brendan Episcopal Church April 4, 2021

Sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

I have long thought that those of us who wear cross necklaces should, during the Easter Season, wear an additional symbol alongside or underneath the cross… that symbol being a comma… So that, when people ask us what it is that we have hanging around our necks, we can say, "a comma."

And when they say, "But why a comma?" we can say, "because it speaks of Easter's deepest meaning"… And when they say, "How in the world does a comma speak of Easter's deepest meaning?" we can say that the Easter proclamation might best be articulated this way… "Never put a period where love has put a comma, because love is still speaking… and actually not only still speaking, but also still singing, rising, resisting the powers that be, and moving in the dark…"

For the sake of full disclosure, we might acknowledge that the whole comma idea, as related to the on-going voice and movement of love, is actually a slogan originally used by the United Church of Christ, which they borrowed from Gracie Allen, who was once quoted as saying, "Never put a period where **God** has put a comma, because **God** is still talking."

And really, Gracie Allen's original version would work for the Easter comma as well. Because either way, whether we say it is **God** who is still speaking, singing, rising, resisting the powers that be and moving in the dark, or **love,** the great good news we celebrate always, and most especially on Easter, is love's power to take what the world declares to be final, set in stone, entrenched, codified, solidified, and dead as a doornail, and to declare it not to be so…

In the story of Jesus, set in first century Palestine, it was the Roman Empire that brought the "periods of domination" to bear on the landscape of the day, declaring things like…

"Might makes right." **Period.**

"The guys with the most toys win." **Period.**

"If you don't give your allegiance to the emperor, you're dead." **Period.**

Just as the religious elite of the day did like-wise, declaring things like…

"Only the righteous have a place at the table." **Period.**

"Healing on the Sabbath is prohibited." **Period.**

"Lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, and sinners of every kind are all outside the parameters of God's grace." **Period.**

And certainly, as the story of Jesus unfolded, the disciples themselves must have come to Easter morning facing a bunch of periods, among them…

"Jesus is dead." **Period.**

"Our hopes for God's kingdom come are over." **Period.**

"It was all a big lie." **Period.**

"Death has the last word after all." **Period.**

And while none of the Easter narratives give clarity about what exactly happened at the tomb in the darkness of Easter morning, what the Gospel writers all tried to make clear in the startling story of the empty tomb is that the dead-end periods of the empire and the religious establishment had lost their irrevocable hold on things, and **something else was on the move**… **something like a comma in its capacity to take what looked like the end of the story and to say otherwise…**

Something that held open the possibility of a future not bound by fear and violence, exclusion, marginalization, hatred and death… Something that held open the possibility of a presence and a power of a totally different kind; the kind that had been made known in the life of Jesus, whose essence and presence, as the Easter narratives tell us, could not be long-held in the grave after all…

Each of the four Gospel writers tells the Easter story differently. But one of the reasons I especially appreciate John's telling of the story, is his way of making the Easter comma both particular and universal, both individual and communal, opening the future for **Mary** (in particular) in the sound of the risen Jesus calling her by name, and opening the future for **the community of faith** (universally) in the risen Jesus' final words to Mary, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my father and **your** father, to my God and **your** God"…

As if to say to his fearful period-bound followers, "What's God's is mine and what's mine is yours, and we're all in this holy, crazy, mysterious, comma-bearing, justice-making, heart-opening, empire-resisting, love-raising life together… So let's get on with it…"

(No wonder one theologian has said that Jesus was buried as a man and rose as a community)…

What I so appreciate about John's way of bringing the Easter comma to both Mary as an **individual** and to Jesus' followers as a **community** is that it invites us to consider the astounding **possibility** that the same could be true for us, both as individuals and as a community created and sustained by a love that refuses to be silenced and long buried in a grave…

The possibility that the Easter proclamation is as true today as it was on the first Easter morning, calling us **each by name** and calling as a **community of Easter people** to hear, to take in, to bear the Easter comma, the Easter song, the Easter possibility of love's fierce and tender presence to the world, **because love is still speaking, singing, rising, resisting the powers that be, and moving in the dark"…**

A possibility I recognized one evening not long ago when I saw a special on Public television about the life of the renowned African American singer Marian Anderson, and learned that on **Easter morning… on Easter morning** in 1939 she gave a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial; a concert that drew an integrated crowd of 75,000 people to the National Mall in pre-civil rights America to hear Marian Anderson sing…

A concert she began by summoning all of her courage, closing her eyes, and in her rich, sonorous voice singing, "*My country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, let freedom ring…"* As the story goes, a roaring cheer followed her every song, and when, at the end of the program the crowd pleaded for more, Marian Anderson sang an encore, *"Nobody knows the trouble I see, Nobody knows my sorrow…"*

It is said that Marian Anderson's beautiful, dignified and courageous concert that Easter morning was one of those moments in the history of the Civil Rights Movement that broke open closed hearts and gave continued courage to those dedicated to the struggle for racial justice, including a young Martin Luther King Jr., who listened to the concert with his family on the radio…

Now the truth is, Marian Anderson gave that concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on that Easter Sunday morning in 1939 because she had been met with a strong and hateful "period"… a period that had denied her access to Constitution Hall and a number of other concert spaces in Washington DC large enough to accommodate all those who would want to hear her sing … That period sounding like this…

"Only white people shall perform here." **Period.**

That period exposing racism's powerful attempts to maintain its hateful grip despite the fact that Marian Anderson had been sharing her gift of song with thousands of people since she was a child in the choir at the Union Baptist Church in South Philadelphia… and despite the fact that her voice had been called by many "the most beautiful voice to come along in 100 years"… and despite the fact that she had taken her gift to Europe as a young woman, and had swept the continent with what was called "Marian Fever."

The truth is, in this country, our country, she had met an endless barrage of such periods over her lifetime…

Like when she tried to enroll in a conservatory of music in Philadelphia as a young woman… **Whites only. Period.**

Like when she tried to find tables in restaurants and rooms in hotels after singing to sold-out audiences across the country… **Whites only. Period.**

Like when any of her people tried to attend her concerts in any number of public concert halls. **Whites only. Period.**

None of those periods able though to keep the Spirit of love, the Spirit of justice and dignity from rising on that Easter morning in 1939 when Marian Anderson stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and through her singing declared, **"Never put a period where love has put a comma, because love is still speaking, still singing, rising, resisting the powers that be, and moving in the dark…"**

That Spirit of love and justice (the Spirit of the risen Christ, I think we might say) moving like the Easter comma through the beloved community gathered on the Washington Mall that Easter morning, and saying in essence, "What's God's is mine and what's mine is yours, and we're all in this holy, crazy, mysterious, comma-bearing, justice-making, heart-opening, empire-resisting, love-raising life together… So let's get on with it…"

And moving not only through the crowd, but that same spirit of the risen Christ calling Marian by name, as in the story of that Easter morning Marian Anderson recalls feeling deep anxiety about the concert she was about to give on the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial, and heard in her anxiety a voice say to her, "Marian, if you were ever to sing for the sake of love and justice, the time is now."

The story of that Easter morning in 1939 echoing it seems to me, the story of the first Easter morning according to John, as in presence of the risen Christ, the Easter comma was made manifest to both Mary as an **individual** and to Jesus' followers as a **community**, inviting them to consider the astounding **possibility** of a love that refuses to be silenced and long buried in a grave, but even in the midst of all the entrenched systems of injustice, the walls that divide, all the violence and vitriol the world has to give, all the hateful periods…inviting them to consider the possibility of a love that is still speaking, singing, rising, resisting, and moving in the dark…

Inviting anyone with ears and heart to hear it, to take it in, and to bear it like an Easter comma to the world God so loves…

It is the same invitation extended to us on this Easter morning amidst the endless "periods" of our own day… the many ways in which the world declares things to be final, set in stone, entrenched, codified, solidified, and dead as a doornail… The many ways in which the world tempts us to "let the periods stand" even as the Coronavirus threatens, and sea levels rise, and racism rages, and walls divide and millions starve and all of us face our own fears and anxieties and despair in the night hours…

Just like on the first Easter morning we are invited to hear something else… to sense something else moving in the dark… something that refuses to be silenced and long-buried in a grave… something that calls to each of us saying, "Be not afraid… I have called you by name, you are mine"…. Something we know to be love…

And while we aren't all Marian Andersons, we are all of us, each of us, called, as Easter people to bear the Easter comma to the world in whatever ways we can… The comma after all, is small and unassuming… without a lot of glitz or glamor… rather plain really… waiting to be carried into our family relationships, our communities, the halls of power…

Where, in the midst of the endless periods that threaten to silence us and to hold us in bondage, we can hold up our commas and say, "It's not the end of the story, because shhh… listen… love is still speaking, singing, rising, resisting the powers that be, and moving in the dark…

"And along with the risen Christ, we're all in this whole crazy, mysterious, comma-bearing, justice-making, heart-opening, empire-resisting, love-raising life together… So let's get on with it…

"Let's get on with it, in the name of the One who is risen indeed, and who even now is moving in the dark bearing the fierce and tender presence of God's love to you and to me and to the world God so loves…"

Dear Friends in Christ, love is still speaking… Alleluia. Alleluia. And amen.