

Easter

John 20:1-18

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church March 31, 2024

You have undoubtedly noticed the preponderance of roses mixed in amongst the more traditional Easter flowers this morning... not to mention the rose petals scattered hither and yon, so plentiful in number they're quite impossible to avoid stepping or sitting on... not to mention the image on your bulletin cover, which, in case you couldn't tell, is a hand-stitched rose I made years ago while trying to figure out the meaning of Easter...

It's roses everywhere this morning, inspired predominantly by a painting created by 20th century German artist Seiger Koeder, who often used the red rose to symbolize the presence of God, and whose painting of Easter morning shows Mary outside the tomb with her arm held in front of her, as if to shield her from the power of what's going on around her as grave stones topple and roses fill the garden...

Our "explosion" of roses this morning inspired by that painting, as well as by a pastor friend in Seattle who once spent an entire Easter Saturday night extending multiple wires at various heights from both sides of the chancel walls to a central spot behind the processional cross, and then hanging from those wires various sizes and shapes of silver and gold cloth, as well as a dozen or so shiny gold spheres, making the entire chancel area look like an explosion of light and life, and opening his parishioners eyes to see something that Easter morning they had not expected to see...

Which, as my pastor friend said, was the point of his creative, chaotic, beautiful, unsettling Easter installation, **because, as he said, if all you ever see is what you expect to see, then all you will ever see is what you expect to see, and goodness knows, as he reminded his parishioners in his sermon that morning, nothing about that first Easter morning or the days that followed was what Jesus' followers expected to see...**

John doesn't tell us in his Gospel narrative why Mary Magdalene went to the tomb in the early darkness of that Sunday morning... Unlike Mark's and Luke's account in which a number of women went to the tomb carrying spices with which to anoint Jesus' body, in John's Gospel it's just Mary Magdalene, without anointing spices, as Jesus' body had already been prepared for burial...

Who knows why Mary went to the tomb that morning... Maybe she just went to grieve... to weep... to be as close to Jesus as possible. John doesn't tell us why she went...

But he does tell us about all the things she saw that she didn't expect to see... Like the stone moved away... a sight so unexpected and unsettling it sent her pell-mell back to the disciples with the only explanation she could "see" was possible, which was that someone had taken Jesus out of the tomb and carried him away...

Shocking news that sent Peter and the other disciple dashing to the tomb where they saw something they didn't expect to see... namely the tomb empty, and the linen wrappings in which Jesus had been buried lying off to one side...

Their confused and hasty retreat back home leaving Mary alone again to see any number of other things she didn't expect to see, foremost among them the risen Jesus, whom she didn't actually even

recognize through “seeing,” but only through hearing Jesus call her name...

Followed by the unexpected response of Jesus as Mary reached for him, Jesus telling her not to hold onto him, but to go to the disciples with the news that he was ascending to his father and their father, to his God and their God... (Because, of course, as we might put it in the language of roses, “Jesus was buried as a seed, and rose as a single blossom, and ascended to ‘his father and our father’ so as to be scattered into the world in a thousand thousand petals and seeds and eruptions of love... something a single blossom, if left intact, and fixed in one single form could never do...)

Followed by a number of post-resurrection appearances in which the risen Jesus was recognized in ways no one would have ever expected; namely (as John tells the story) through his wounds, and through the breath of his spirit (a little divine CPR) given to his frightened and flagging disciples, and through a breakfast of fish on the shore...

All of it suggesting that the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection is an attack on all old perceptions about where and how God’s presence is made manifest in the world and just what that presence is up to... the story not only defying all expectations about God and God’s ways, but turning them up-side-down...

And lest the preponderance of roses this morning leads you to imagine a sort of “Hallmarkian flavor” to the Easter narrative, I ask you to look at the rose on the front of your bulletin cover this morning, which, as I said at the outset of my sermon, I hand-stitched a number of years ago when trying to figure out the meaning of Easter...

What you don't know is that when I first sat down to make this rose, I started with an apple, made out of red felt... the apple, as we all know, being the symbol of sin in our faith tradition, the forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Eve in the story about their "fall from grace."

Along with the felt apple I also had in my mind's eye...

- the roses of Seiger Koeder, symbolizing the presence of God,
- and the great Easter icon that shows the risen Jesus standing on his cross, which lies at an angle between heaven and hell... And Jesus, standing on that cross, extending his hand down into hell, to take the hand of Adam...
- and a small snippet from a fifteenth century English hymn that gives thanks for the apple Adam took, for as the lyrics go,

*Ne had the apple taken been
Ne had the apple taken been
Ne had never Our Lady
A-been heaven's queen*

As if to say, had not the apple taken been there would have been no need for Mary, for Jesus... for God's coming into our human failing and suffering to bring God's mercy and grace and love... The last stanza of that 15th century hymn going like this...

*Blessed be the time
That apple taken was
Therefore we may singen
Deo gratias
Deo gratias.
Thanks be to God...*

All of these offerings informing my work then, as I cut the felt apple into pieces, and transformed that symbol of sin into a rose... No "sweet rose" this... no "Hallmarkian" rose, but one that speaks of a love whose presence and power stems from its willingness to accompany the beloved (God's beloved creation) into pain and shame, into brokenness and despair, into suffering and death...

And there to be Love's fullest measure... There, to extend Love's deepest treasure... God's very self made incarnate, stitched into the fabric of creation in ways no one would ever expect... up-side-down ways, scandalous ways, apple riven and red rose risen ways, with no between between them...

A love that, in its willingness to enter death for the sake of the beloved, scatters rose petals even there, in the howling waste of wilderness, undermining and disarming the power of death completely... A love that, once let loose in the world, can never be held by Empire or by coercion, by cross or grave, but rises again and again in the very craziest of second comings, calling us, imploring us to keep our eyes and hearts open for signs of the risen Christ in times and places we would never expect, because if all we see is what we expect to see, then all we will ever see is what we expect to see... All the while Easter is inviting us to see so much more...

Which, in many ways, would be a wonderful last line for an Easter sermon... But I realize that for many of us this "deeper" kind of seeing is often clouded by the worries and anxieties that threaten our days and haunt our nights... worries and anxieties related to the suffering of our world, the dysfunction in our political institutions, the demise of our natural ecosystems, the dissention in our communities, the divisions in our families, the dis-eases that we carry in ourselves...

It's just the truth that many of us come to Easter morning wondering how the good news of the day changes anything about our lives... And because this is true, I have one more thing to say related to the roses that surround us this morning...

So, one day in late March about twenty years ago, I was driving between Blue Hill and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Bangor for about the millionth time. Easter was early that year, as it is this year, and we had a lot more snow then than we do now. It was a wintry Holy Week, with lots of snow, much of it hardened on the surface by a layer of ice, which more often than not broke through with any weight at all, sending all winter-walkers thigh-deep into the drifts...

I was traveling north on Rt. 15, and was about to pass Bill Raiten and Elena Borkowsky's house in North Blue Hill, friends of ours who, in those years, had a number of greenhouses and wonderful vegetable gardens, tended in part by Elena's elderly mother Olga, who had come with her husband Jacov from Russia to live with Elena and Bill a few years prior...

So, there I was, traveling down Rt. 15 at my normal break-neck speed, when all of a sudden, I saw what I thought was a black bear walking on all fours across Bill and Elena's snow-covered front yard toward their green houses, which in late March, would already have been filled with seedlings...

I slowed down, and upon a closer look, realized that what I saw wasn't a bear at all, but rather Elena's 85-year-old mother in a fur coat... crawling on all fours across the crusty snow to get to the greenhouses, because of course, crawling on all fours made it possible for her to stay on top of the snow, while walking on two legs would not...

As I've thought about that image every Holy Week and every Easter since then, I've realized that for many of us getting to the joy of Easter is like Olga's slow crawl across the snow and ice to get to the place where there were green shoots rising... spring in the midst of winter... hope in the midst of death...

Sometimes it just feels like a slow, slow crawl toward something we can barely believe is true...

So anyway, I was remembering this image again this year as I was working on this morning's Easter's sermon... And as sometimes happens in the writing process, a vague memory came to me... a vague memory of a song... A song that I remembered included in its lyrics both a reference to snow and to a rose...

And so I Googled "rose" and "snow" and "song" and found the song that was buried somewhere deep in the recesses of my mind (or heart)... a song entitled "The Rose," the last verse of which goes like this...

*When the night has been too lonely, and the road has been too long,
And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,
Just remember in the winter, far beneath the winter snows,
Lies the seed, that with the sun's love, in the spring becomes the rose.*

And I thought to myself, "There it is... The true joy Easter invites us to see... if we can only see beyond what we expect to see... Even as we're crawling toward Easter on all fours, wondering if we'll ever really get to the joy the story promises..."

There, under the snow is the rose, the presence of God, promising new life even when we can't see it... "Eastering back behind our lines," as one poet has put it... "Eastering back behind our lines of defense, our lines of fear and doubt and shame and grief..." "Eastering back" to make roses from our jagged ragged pieces of apple... "Eastering back" into the frozen landscapes of our lives to speak of a love that is stronger than death...

A love that calls us each by name, just as Jesus called Mary's name in the garden on that first Easter morning... And there puts into our hands not only the bread of his crucified and risen body, but also seeds and petals bearing the story of a rose that even now is rising in the

dark... waiting for us to see it, to be it... and to break into blossom yet one more time...