

Superbloom!
Easter Sunday – John 20:1-18
April 4, 2021
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I used to make the joke any time I was speaking in front of a group that I'm a preacher, so I'm not used to talking to people who are awake and paying attention. After a year of preaching into the lens of a camera, I can honestly say I'm not used to speaking in front of people at all! But what a gift it is for us to be able to gather together on Easter Sunday, more than a year after we last did so. I'm glad we made it here today. I know our liturgical calendar says Good Friday only last 24 hours, but does anyone else feel like it's been Good Friday since last March? After all that we've gone through since then, it's only appropriate that we gather again to raise our triumphant "Halleluia!" on this most holy of days.

But this year, Easter has been drastically altered. For a while, I wasn't even sure we would be able to worship together today. Weighing the risks and rewards has been one of the most challenging aspects of figuring out how we do church in the midst of a pandemic. I'm so thankful we here today, but it feels a lot different than normal. No singing of the "Hallelujah Chorus." No passing the communion trays to your neighbors. No congregating in the hallways to talk about the life-changing sermon (OK, maybe a bit of wishful thinking on my part). The calendar says Easter, but the worship service may not feel like quite the celebration it should be.

So, even though this the most important holy day of the year, I'm feeling all the emotions. Yes, there is joy, but there is so much more this year. Sadness and anger and what's been taken from us. Exhaustion from all the work it takes to put together a COVID-safe Easter experience. Hopeful that we will be able to worship on Sunday again in the near future, but worried about how to keep everyone safe in doing so.

You know, that's probably about how Jesus felt during Holy Week. Sadness and anger and how he had been misunderstood and mistreated. Exhaustion from all the work it took to make the kingdom of God real here on earth. Hopeful that his disciples would carry on his mission after he was gone. Worried they wouldn't. A solace for me in my down moments this past year has been knowing that Jesus is right there with me. The Jesus who walked the brutal path of Holy Week, the Jesus who knows what it's like to have something stolen from him, the Jesus who understood loneliness and isolation is also the Jesus who was resurrected and walked out of the tomb on this Easter Sunday. Even in the darkest times, even in the driest places, even when we feel like we have no more tears left to cry, there is hope. And, as Paul reminds us in Romans, hope does not disappoint.

I wonder if this was in Mary Magdalene's heart when she came to garden that Easter morning. I mean, she knew Jesus was dead, she saw him bloodied and beaten, hanging on the cross. She'd watched her dreams shatter along with his body, her joy washed away with his tears, her song of praise drowned out by his cries of anguish. But as she came to the garden to anoint his dead body, I have to wonder if there was still a glimmer of hope for her. After all, he did say he would rise again, didn't he? Hebrews reminds us, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Mary's hope was like a seed buried way down deep that stubbornly refused to die.

I heard a story about that recently that has changed my whole perspective on this pandemic. I learned about a rare desert botanical phenomenon in which an unusually high proportion of wildflowers whose seeds have lain dormant in desert soil germinate and blossom at

roughly the same time, usually in relation to a wet rainy season. The desert comes alive with an explosion of wildflowers. It's called a superbloom. This occurrence is so extraordinary it only happens about every 10 years or so, in of all places, the desert.

The imagery of the desert is a powerful one in scripture. It's usually used to denote a time of trial, a place of loneliness and isolation, a period of lostness. The Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years before reaching the Promised Land. After his baptism, Jesus is taken out into the desert, where he is tempted by Satan. Time and time again, the desert is a reminder of life's harshness.

And yet, in the midst of even the most arid desert, God is making things grow. The prophet Isaiah says in chapter 35, "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy." The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. God can make all the conditions just right for the desert to spring forth with colorful plants and flowers. Our God is the God of the superbloom.

I don't know about you, but this past year has felt like a desert to me. The loneliness, the fear, the aimless wandering, the lack of knowing when the desert is ever going to end. This desert experience has changed us, and we're only beginning to discover how profoundly. I worry that we are more fearful, more isolated, more on edge than we were when this all started. Did you notice the lack of shootings in the past year? And the proliferation of them in the past few weeks? There will never be normal again. This desert will always be with us.

For me, it feels like the seeds of new life have been buried way down deep in the desert of my heart. This past year has heaped pain and loss and disappointment and bitterness on top of my soul, like shovelfuls of dirt being thrown on a coffin. Churches and schools close. More dirt. George Floyd is killed by a police officer. More dirt. Close friends die from Covid. More dirt. A relative's wedding postponed. More dirt. Argh! I left my mask in the car again! More dirt. Another round of warnings and restrictions. More dirt. A contentious and divisive election. More dirt. Each new fear or conflict or death brought with it more dirt, burying us deeper and deeper, pushing us further out into the desert, to the point that some of us may have wondered if we'd ever make it back. Will we ever make it back? Sometimes it feels like our hope is still buried, doesn't it?

And yet... "The wilderness will rejoice and blossom." Is it any surprise that when Mary Magdalene sees the risen Jesus that she thinks he's the gardener? Because he is! Christ is the one who makes the desert bloom and the parched land flow with water. Christ is the one who takes on all the darkness of Good Friday and then bursts forth like a beautiful bouquet from the tomb on Easter Sunday. Christ is the one who looks at your darkest situation and declares it's time for a superbloom. Where we see death, Christ makes life. Where we see darkness, Christ shines. Where we feel despair, Christ brings hope.

Listen again to the definition of a superbloom. It's a botanical phenomenon in which unusually high proportion of wildflowers whose seeds have lain dormant in desert soil germinate and blossom at roughly the same time. I can think of no better description of the state of our souls this past year than lying dormant in desert soil. But now, it's time for a superbloom. It's time for the master gardener to roll away the stone, to remove the dirt, to pry open our hearts like the lid of a coffin and to speak words of new life into our weary bones parched souls. It's time for us to open our eyes to the resurrection of new life all around us, which includes everything from vaccinations to budding flowers to baseballs being tossed around the diamond. God is at work here, bringing forth lush greenery in this year-long desert in which we have been living.

Now, this doesn't mean we're out of the woods, to mix my biome metaphors. Covid still exists, people are still getting sick, and it's just as important now as it was a year ago to put the health and safety of others first. Christ's resurrection doesn't give us permission to take for granted the life God has given us and others. But it does mean that whatever may have died within us this past year can still live again. Just as Christ rose from the grave, so can our hopes, our dreams, our beliefs that God has not forgotten us, that God has not forsaken us.

When we leave this place today -socially-distanced, of course – the desert will still exist. Jesus is a gardener, not a magician. But if we have the eyes to see it, new life has begun appearing all around us. And our call as followers of Christ is to witness to that new life in how we choose to live. Do we live in fear or by faith? Do we stoke the fires of conflict or do we let our words of peace quench them? Do we look for reasons to criticize and complain – because we know we'll always find them – or do we seek out the positive? Do we choose frustration or understanding? Do we choose despair or hope? If we don't choose hope, then we are effectively trying to put the stone back on the tomb. But Jesus isn't in there anymore.

Folks, we are different today than we were a year ago. We've been changed. But how? I think that's kind of up to us. I think we've been changed in good and bad ways, all of us. I read a quote this week that has changed my life: "What you feed grows, and what you starve dies." What if we choose to starve negativity, judgment, and the politicizing of every single thing? What if we choose to feed joy, hope, and the dignity of every human being? Jesus didn't come back from the dead so we could be comfortable. He came back to show us a better way. The desert? The dark tomb? He's not there. It's time for a superbloom in our hearts and in our world. May hope and love and joy burst forth from your heart this Easter. Thanks be to God.