

Faith Mennonite Church
April 4, 2010 – Easter
“New heavens and a new earth”
Joetta Schlabach

“Finding a New Voice in the Resurrection”
Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

Several centuries before the time of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah heard a message from God in the midst of exile, miles from Jerusalem—Jerusalem, the holy city that had been sacked by stronger enemies. Into that experience of despair came these words:

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight. (Isaiah 65:17-18)

The people of Israel who were in exile *did* return to Jerusalem and *did* have an opportunity to rebuild the walls of their city and their temple. Yet the new Jerusalem, the new creation that Isaiah spoke of remained a dream. It was still only a deep longing centuries later at the time of Jesus. Many who followed Jesus placed their hope in him, expecting that he might be the Chosen One to rule and set things right in Jerusalem. But Jerusalem turned out to be the seat of his execution not his coronation.

And now, 2000 years later, Jerusalem still has not found its peace. Its joy is marred by conflict between Jewish and Palestinian communities. Many observers believe this unresolved conflict fuels other acts of terrorism around the world. But our hope, the hope we receive in the resurrection is that we will *yet* see the day when

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
(when) the lion shall eat straw like the ox...
(when none) shall not hurt or destroy on all (God's) holy mountain. (65:25)

What gives us the right to hope? What gives us the audacity to hope? What makes Easter the most special Sunday in the Christian year? Our hope begins in the testimony of the earliest Christians, those followers of Jesus who listened and learned from him, who witnessed his death, and then in the midst of their deepest grief and shattered dreams, experienced his presence anew in a palpable way. Mary Magdalene said: “I have seen the Lord!”

But the testimony of others is only the beginning. Our hope, the audacious hope that carries us forward, comes as we join in the experience of the presence of the living Christ today. And our path to that presence, to that hope, often mirrors the experiences of the disciples on that first Easter morning.

Like Mary, who went to the tomb while it was yet dark, many of us begin our search for Jesus in the dark. We're not sure what we're looking for, only that we have an unfulfilled longing within us. Or perhaps, like Mary, we've been long-time followers of Jesus. We once felt his presence keenly, but now for any number of reasons we feel thrust into the darkness. We no longer sense God's presence in the same way we once did.

Or like Peter and the other disciple, we sometimes become like children competing in a foot race. We run to the latest spiritual fad, go "church shopping," and latch onto something we see and say we believe because it seems to be a hit for others. But we don't necessarily stay long enough or go deeply enough to understand fully. A foot race is fun, but the long-term conditioning, following Jesus' way of love, of peacemaking in the face of hate and resistance is another matter. Entering fully into the presence of the living Christ means that we hold our brokenness and our questions in the light of God in a loving, committed community.

Finally, there comes a time when we, like Mary on her return to the tomb, realize we cannot run and cannot hide our emotions and our questions. We must enter the pain and the truth of our losses, our disappointments. We admit that we don't know where God is. We give up looking alone and we turn. We turn to ask for the help of another—of a faith community—just as Mary turned to who she thought was the gardener. Then, just then, we too hear the voice of Jesus say our name: Pat, Travis, Laurie, Gregg, Lis, Matthew, William, Hannah, Darrell, Glenn... (Will you help me? Will you stand up and turn to those around you and say each other's names? And if you don't know someone, ask them their name, and then repeat it.)

The living Christ calls out to each of us, not just on this special Easter Sunday, but every day. The living Christ invites us to be part of a community of hope that lives in expectation of new heavens and a new earth. And because we expect it, we join in the work of creating it. Jesus said to Mary, "I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God." Jesus asked Mary to take this message to his disciples: we are together in a joint mission of our God!

While many of our fellow citizens in this country seethe with anger, we breathe and speak the love of Christ. While many live in fear and distrust, feeling the need to protect themselves with weapons or behind elaborate security systems, we follow one who willingly faced death and empowers us to forgive those who would do us harm. We joyfully witness grown men taking a position of humility to receive the waters of baptism. We joyfully witness those who took off a week of paid work to voluntarily labor for those who have suffered in places like New Orleans. We joyfully witness Eric and others who gathered in Washington, DC, several weeks ago to raise a voice for the immigrant community among us. We joyfully witness as families plant a portion of their gardens to share with others in need. Each step we take draws us into the presence of the risen Christ where we can join our voice with that of Mary Magdalene: "I have seen the Lord!"