

Faith Mennonite Church
March 31, 2013 - Easter
Joetta Schlabach

Seeking life; Destroying death
Isaiah 65:17-25, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

Last Monday when I came to the church office I noticed several shoots emerging from the soil in the front flower garden where the snow had receded, leaving a few inches of bare ground next to the sidewalk. All winter I've heard the meteorologists say that the ground froze this year before the snow cover came, thus creating conditions for melting snow to run off rather than sink into the soil this spring. So I wasn't expecting to see life pushing through quite yet, assuming that much of the ground was still frozen. I was still in a wintery, death mode. But there it was: new life rising up next to the crusty, icy snow—a small, annual miracle that always surprises us as if we're witnessing it for the first time.

The gospel passage that we read from Luke this morning depicts a similar sequence. A group of faithful women had stood by, no doubt in horror and devastation, as Jesus was put to death. They followed Joseph of Arimathea, the man who received permission to remove Jesus' body from the cross, to see where he would lay it. And then, after a Sabbath-day pause, the women returned to apply spices to his body, in keeping with the burial customs of the day. These faithful women were still in winter. The ground beneath their grieving feet was still frozen.

Only.... it wasn't! But their spring-time moment was different from ours. We witness this miracle year after year. We know that the life of bulbs and tree buds emerges each spring from the death of the hard, cold, frozen soil. But Luke's women, these women who loved and followed Jesus didn't have the experience or expectation of resurrection. They were coming in search of a body, of a life that was over, of a movement that had come crashing to an end in the midst of Roman empirical strength and religious infighting. They would make death as palatable as possible, respectfully and lovingly applying spices to the body of the One who had given so much life to them.

But Jesus' body wasn't in the tomb. Instead there were mysterious guides to offer an explanation. Each of the gospels renders this moment a bit differently and it's no wonder really; we each notice something different about spring each year: In Luke's telling there were two men in dazzling robes; in Matthew it was a single angel; and in Mark a young man. In John, it is Jesus himself who appears to the solitary, weeping, Mary Magdalene. The message of the guides in all of the accounts is that Jesus has been raised; he is not dead. Luke's account includes two unique features. First the question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" and second, the admonition: "Remember...remember what Jesus told you...that he would die and on the third day be raised again."

Something clicked for the women, who took the messengers at their word and went to tell the disciples. They trusted that Jesus *was* living and they left the place of the dead to share this good news of new life. On first hearing, the disciples weren't sure what to make of the women's report; it sounded like a wild tale from ecstatic women. But with time, they too believed. Before long, as we find in the book of Acts, Peter would be preaching powerful sermons, bearing witness to Jesus' death and resurrection, and remembering what Jesus had told them while he was alive. The Apostle Paul, not a first-hand witness to the resurrection and, in fact, one who persecuted the early Christian movement, would write eloquently about the reconciling power of

Jesus' death and resurrection. As we read in First Corinthians, Paul firmly believed that Jesus' resurrection reversed the death tide, brought about by the sin of the first human, offering us all hope of the resurrection, offering ultimate victory of the power and life of God over the powers of darkness and death.

Like the disciples, we still struggle to believe. Resurrection is probably a more difficult concept to grasp today in our highly scientific and rational world, than it was 2,000 years ago. But like the women, we continue to follow the One whom we love. And this following, even at times when we are racked with doubt and overcome with despair, makes room for the Spirit of Life to break into our darkness, our near-death reality and breathe again the question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

It's so easy because of 24-7 news streams and the tendency for the press to feed us a constant diet of sensation and disaster, to feel that we live in a dying world, that the earth is intractably frozen in conflict. But our risen Savior invites us to look for the life, to anticipate new life, even in places of deep darkness and pain.

I heard two such stories this week that testified to this resurrection life. Some of you may have heard them too. The first was a story by National Public Radio reporter Deborah Amos about young Syrians working in Turkey to provide aid to their compatriots who are refugees in Turkey as well as those who are displaced in Syria. Now it's nearly impossible to hear or imagine anything positive about Syria these days.

But Amos told the story of a young Syrian who left a high-paying job in Saudi Arabia and went to Turkey to begin working in humanitarian assistance. He had no previous aid-related experience, but he had management skills and a passion for his people and country. Other young Syrians, with even fewer skills, have joined him and together they're learning the ins and outs of providing humanitarian assistance. Because of their networks back in Syria, they're able to channel aid to people that most of the large international humanitarian agencies are not able to reach because of security concerns. And, most importantly, according to Amos, they're giving birth to the beginning of a civil society that will be much needed when the Syrian conflict ends. New life springing up in the midst of death.

A second story was from an interview that Krista Tippet conducted with Congressman John Lewis of Georgia. Congressman Lewis marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and was beaten and jailed numerous times for his fight against racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws in the south. Since 1987 he has represented Georgia's 5th congressional district in the US House of Representatives. That in itself is a resurrection story: one who was once brutally treated by the laws of this country now working to draft and shape new laws. Rep Lewis spoke of the need to combine an urgent, but nonviolent commitment to justice with a persistent patience, believing that "if it doesn't happen in my generation, it will happen in the next." Resurrection hope!

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often spoke of the "beloved community," a term that was originally coined at the beginning of the 20th century by Josiah Royce who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Dr. King popularized this phrase in a way that captured the "imagination of people of goodwill all over the world."

Dr. King's "Beloved Community" was a resurrection vision. In this community all people can share in the wealth of the earth...poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated... racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood... international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power... love and trust

will triumph over fear and hatred...peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.”¹

In her interview, Tippett reminded Lewis of this “Beloved Community” and wondered how he can work in a divided congress that is such a far cry from that vision. In the past year or so we’ve witnessed a number of career politicians make the decision to not seek re-election because they find the atmosphere of congress so divisive, so ineffective. But Congressman Lewis remembers...remembers true pain and torture and remembers how the power of nonviolent action broke the legal back of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination in this country. It is this memory that energizes him to fight on with this patient, persistent resurrection hope. His question is not “will it get done in my lifetime...in this congress?” but “have *I* worked hard enough...have *I* done enough.”

Like the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians, Congressman Lewis trusts the big picture to God. It is God who raised Jesus and it is God who will ultimately destroy death. God will destroy the most difficult places of intractable evil. These need not be our ultimate concern. Our task is to work to notice and to nurture the signs of life emerging in unexpected ways and places around us. May we be filled with patient, persistent resurrection hope. May resurrection life spring up within and around us.

¹ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>