

One of our devotional writers wrote that Sunday would be about new life and joy, and “impossibility!” ...but that The Last Supper was easier to wrap our minds around since Jesus gave clear and concrete teachings, like “Eat this bread in remembrance of me,” or “as you have seen me wash feet like a servant, follow my example.” I think it might be easier to go around and wash everyone’s feet this morning than attempt the “impossibility” of giving a sermon that will meet so many different needs and lift so many different spirits!

If truth be known, I have not been feeling very Easterlike recently. Maybe it was some “acheyness” getting a vaccination. Maybe it’s knowing so many people who are struggling with sickness or loss, and we did just lose a dear woman who was like another mother to all of us, in a very close neighborhood. Maybe its the relentless bad news nationally and worldwide. Yes, Easter can sometimes feel like pie-in-the-sky ideals and impossibilities, or a one day holiday for singing and feasting, then back to life’s grind. Jesus once said to his followers, “Tell what you hear and see... the dead are raised, the blind can see, the poor hear good news!” But what if we haven’t heard or seen any really big miracles, like somebody raised from the dead, or somebody seeing after being blind?

Well, we can always tell about the miracle of LOVE... how love can heal, lift the spirit, and give new life, which is truly “resurrection” power. We can tell about the resurrecting conviction of Goodness and Mercy, as Psalm 23 says: “Surely Goodness and Mercy will follow me all the days of my life!” Goodness and Mercy are, of course, kinds of Love. And to my mind, they may be the best synonyms for “God.” Charlie Brown, often a voice of truth and wisdom in the Peanuts comic strip, once complained to Lucy that there is nothing worse in life than being unloved. Conversely, we could add that there is nothing better in life than being loved!

Christians see Jesus as the embodiment of Divine Love, as we sing in the hymn “Love Divine All Loves Excelling.” His excelling love,

his selfless love, is amazingly forgiving, healing, and resurrecting. Paul, formerly Saul, was a persecutor and murderer of Christians. So when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, it was not only in blinding light, but with forgiving love. Paul called himself the “least of the apostles, unfit to be an apostle,” and says he only became a spiritual leader by the sheer Grace of God. Paul was saved from his murderous ways by Love, Divine Love, a gracious forgiving love!

Then we have the story of Mary Magdalene. She also felt healing, forgiving Grace from Jesus. She was known to have led a troubled life. We read that Jesus had “cast demons out from her.” Some accounts imply that she was a prostitute. We don’t know the exact nature of her sins and mental troubles, but it is clear that Jesus’ first encounter with her was about healing. He loved her with healing grace; she becomes a close follower and some think they even see her in a painting of The Last Supper, a feminine figure at the table. It is noteworthy that the gospels agree she is the first person Jesus appears to after his death. Two other disciples look into the empty tomb, then go home, but it is Mary who stays, and to whom Jesus appears and speaks. Her tears show how close she felt to Jesus. Her weeping moves him. So when he calls her by name, she finally recognizes him. They have had a heart to heart connection, and part of that is being called by name, by one who really knows you (one who “gets you,” one who knows your limits, your foibles, your mistakes in life, and still loves you, stands by you.)

So our Easter proclamations may seem like pure joy and victory on the surface, but there is always a back story. There is often a story of healing and restoration before Easter joy and victory. In my own life there have been several times when I’m sure that “Gracious Love” saved me. I probably told this story before, but it bears repeating since it is engrained in my memory. Once I felt a little like Charlie Brown, nothing going right. It was my first job teaching, at a boarding school! 22 years old, feeling totally unprepared to deal with a dorm

hall of about 20 boys, 5th to 9th grade, every day, 24/7! Besides teaching Spanish all day and coaching soccer after school, it was 3 meals a day with them and then all evening as a dorm parent. Exhausting! ...with very few chances to rest, and impossible to find the appropriate discipline for all the shenanigans going on. My Dad was a successful school principal and former teacher, so I felt like a failure compared to him. It was for us both to share how miserable and discouraged I was, so he wisely referred me to a colleague of his at a downtown counseling center. In just a few sessions she “got me,” recognized my temperament and the leanings of my soul, and introduced me to the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, and his book “The Wounded Healer.” More than that, however, she said something I’d never forget. She said very slowly, “Do you know how much your father loves you???” Wow. I did know deep down that my father loved me, and was proud of me, but it was sure good and healing to hear the words said, even if by proxy! Yes, it is often true that men do not express love very easily, at least not in words. There was also much Grace in that love; I discovered it did not matter if I succeeded at that boarding school or not, that it is OK, even normal in life, to have weaknesses, failings, and a need to start over. I did happily move on to a day school of older students the following year.

The Easter song we sang, “Enter the Joy” was written by one with first-hand experience of resurrecting, gracious love. Did you hear all the references to darkness, to feeling like a stranger, feeling all alone? Composer Ken Medema was born blind, so he had more than his share of walking in darkness and feeling left out. But he had resurrection miracles in his life through music and gracious love. He recalls his first experience at a dance, where he was on the sidelines like a wall flower, and a girl asked him to dance. He remembers it as like a “fresh breath of Spring,” that she taught him to sing in a whole new way. In his song “Enter the Joy,” he speaks of frightened strangers, bound by their past, set free by Grace for new friendships,

new beginnings, new love. When he says that Christ is “The Way,” he means the ways of resurrection that he mentions: Letting go of guilt, letting go of fear, loving the stranger or aliens, facing the powers of darkness, being free for new friendship, caring for all who cry in the night... these are all the Way of Christ, they are all forms of love, gracious, self-giving love.

We need not be afraid of people who are different from ourselves, who are strangers. We need not be afraid to be different ourselves. We need not be afraid to become our authentic selves! This is loving ourselves fully, as God loves us, quirks, foibles and all! When we do that for ourselves, we know that we can do the same for others. We can allow people to be themselves, to grow and change according to how God is leading them. This is the beauty of the Mary Magdalene story; she was a woman on the margins of “good society” whom Jesus loved so graciously that he released her from her baggage, her past, and included her in his band of followers; Jesus “drew the circle wide.” He widened the circle of inclusive love, and she became one of the most devoted women, remaining at the tomb weeping when the other disciples had gone home. He had earlier said about her that she loved much because she was forgiven much. Somehow Jesus combines Love with Mercy; the divine Love of God is always gracious, forgiving, understanding. When we are so loved or understood, this can be nothing short of new life or resurrection!

I wrote a song many years ago, in a rather dark, depressing time, the end of a marriage. Yet I also felt some “Easter dawn” of new life, new love, new wisdom, learning and growing, becoming more my true self. So I called the song “Spirit Blooming.” We are all a “work in progress.” As with Mary Magdalene, Jesus calls us each by name. Jesus knows our real name. He “gets us,” sees our heart and soul, knows our authentic or true self! May we receive such Divine love and affirmation, however we find ourselves learning and growing. Jesus’ love is “gracious love,” and for us it is also “Resurrection.”

SPIRIT BLOOMING, by Ross Varney

*1. Sown in the dark fertile soil of the womb,
Sprouting, growing, not yet in bloom.
Falling, rising, finding our way.
Risking, learning, living each day.
Hearing your voice that says “I am the Way,”
Send your Light, Lord, Send your Light Lord,
Send your Light upon our path
and we will follow faithfully.*

*2. So many dangers and trials we’ve known,
Some of our making, some not our own.
We are your children beloved and dear,
You know our hearts and you share our tears.
And always with Grace you say “Loved ones draw near,”
Set us free, Lord, Set us free, Lord,;
Set us free to be the ones
that you imagined eternally.*

*3. So, with each step we draw closer to you,
Loving, serving, “All is made new!”
We are the miracle seed that has grown,
Learning to love and to know as we’re known.
Finding your Love and your Joy now our own,
We are free, Lord, We are free, Lord,
We are free to be the ones
that you created beautifully!*