The Divine Nevertheless
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
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Introduction to the Text
We are familiar with the Easter Narratives from the Gospels. We are so familiar that sometimes we miss the details that distinguish each one. For example, in today’s text from Matthew, notice these things:
Two women come to the tomb - the two Marys. They were with Jesus from Galilee, they heard him say he would suffer and he would rise. They stayed with him even at the cross, they visited the tomb as Jesus’ body was enclosed inside. And now, they have come early on Sunday morning. They have come, Matthew says, to see - to study - to consider - the tomb. And when they know Jesus has risen, “they leave the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.”
Listen for Matthew’s Easter morning good news for you:
28After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

Sermon

The Divine Nevertheless!
Easter, in a word, is
NEVERTHELESS!
Easter is - even so!
Easter is - HOWEVER!
Easter puts the comma where the world puts a period.
Easter puts her hand out and says, NONETHELESS!
Not death - BUT - Life!
The powers say, Crucifixion. God says, even so, Resurrection!
The world says Good Friday. God says, AND YET, EASTER! And we say, with God, Christ is Risen indeed!
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The women followed him from Galilee, they provided for him, the gospel says.
They were there for the supper whether Matthew wrote it down or not.
They were there, at the cross, and they followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and saw the stone put in place.
BUT!
But, the Marys had not given up on God yet.
And it’s a good thing, too, because the divine nevertheless was coming on Sunday morning!
A lot of folks like John’s Easter story better, the solo Mary Magdalene, come with spices to anoint Jesus’ body, called by name by her beloved risen teacher, and I love that version. But Matthew’s what we’re reading today.
But here’s the thing about Matthew’s version.
Matthew’s Mary’s didn’t come with spices to anoint a body.
They came, the Greek says, to study the tomb.
I submit to you, they came wondering, asking if perhaps his words were true?
They came anticipating resurrection.
And yes, when the angel appeared to them, they were afraid,
“5But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.”
And when Jesus appeared and said, “greetings,” they were ready to fall to his feet in worship.
Let me propose to you that it was their experience of the kind of life that Jesus led, that helped the Mary’s to believe he could rise from death.

It was the memory of a life filled with overturned expectations, with outsiders brought inside, with the last becoming the first - that life of howevers and even-sos, and in spite ofs, and notwithstandings, and even thoughs and buts that made it possible to believe that was was not there in that tomb, but had risen!

They ran out of wine, but Jesus made more.

The prodigal son ran away from home, but the Father welcomed him home!

The woman was crippled for 18 years, but Jesus said, that's not your last chapter!

The leper was ostracized and suffering, but Jesus touched him and made him well!

They had no food, but Jesus fed 5000 anyway! But that's not all, 4000 more! But, that's not even counting the women and kids!

She was an adulterer, they were going to stone her, but Jesus said, let he who is without sin cast the first stone!

Lazarus was dead, but Jesus raised him up!

The little girl was dead, but Jesus raised her up!

He was a king, but he came to proclaim good news to the poor!

The betrayer was there, but Jesus shared the cup with all of them!

Jesus told them, "that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, BUT on the third day rise again."

Whatever bad news there was, Jesus said, BUT! No wonder, remembering that truth, the women could embrace the unexpected, the unbelievable, the resurrection, the divine nevertheless.
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A few years later, Peter preached a great however sermon -
Peter had denied Jesus and left him,
Peter took a little while to believe the women,
But he became a leader in the Way,
Peter preached the divine nevertheless:
“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear…” (Acts 10)
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St. Marcus Borg preached the divine nevertheless: The Romans put Jesus to death, but “God said yes to Jesus and no to the powers who killed him. Jesus Lives. God has vindicated Jesus.” (Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in The Last Week.)

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Now this is crucial.

Right now, we need the divine nevertheless.

Even so, people have celebrated the Divine Nevertheless under worse circumstances than ours. In camps and hidden passages and bomb shelters and plague towns, God’s love has been celebrated. Defiant joy was proclaimed in the rubble after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and I know it because I heard Haitian Sister Claire Marie preach that message to my congregation just a few months later, drawing us into that great call and response she had heard in Port au Prince: God is good / All the Time. Even So. All the time / God is Good.

A number of my non-clergy friends have pondered whether their families should celebrate Easter or Passover this year, celebrate birthdays or baby showers or anniversaries. And the answer has come back resoundingly, yes, right now, we are called to proclaim good news, to offer defiant joy, to claim the Divine Nevertheless.

We need good news to stun us and shake us. On Easter Sunday this is our good news: "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." (Frederick Buechner)

Today might not feel like the Easter we’re used to, and guess what: on the day when it is safe for us all to be together again, on that day we will celebrate Easter all over again. But this morning, we do what the great poet invites: We practice resurrection. We look for the divine nevertheless.

Easter is renewed hope in the midst of hardship; resurrection in the face of death; the bright shining light in the midst of darkness that nothing can overcome. Easter is the unexpected that Christians are asked to expect. Easter is the unrecognizable that Christians are asked to look for. Easter is what scares the pants off of us and gives us reassurance and joy at the same time. Easter is Good Friday survived and turned upside down. Easter is the promise that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, not even CoVid19 will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Easter is God’s divine nevertheless. Hallelujah. Amen.