

Martha Phillips: New Life

Sermon At Seekers, Easter 1998

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New Life

As the Psalmist says, *"This is the day which the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it."* (Psalms 118:24). On this Easter Day in the light of the Cross, it is easy for us to say: "Alleluia, Christ is Risen." For Mary Magdalene and the other women this came after much fear and doubt. It was a day fraught with contrast just as Jesus' ministry had been.

In John 20:9 it tells us: *"They did not understand from scripture, that Jesus had to rise from the dead."* When I think of what took place that first Easter I get this fuzzy picture of people scurrying around in semi-darkness, full of fear and doubt, with maybe a glimmer of hope. Mary Magdalene runs and tells the disciples. Peter and John come running. John peers into the tomb but Peter, the one who had denied Jesus three times, bravely walks into the tomb, followed by John. When they see the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head folded and lying separately, they believed. The disciples then run home but Mary stays, still weeping. When the angel asks why she is weeping, she answers: *"They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him."* (John 20:14). At this point Jesus is standing right in front of her but she doesn't recognize him. She mistakes him for the gardener. Finally he calls her by name: **"Mary."** She recognizes him then by responding, "Rabboni."

On this side of the Cross, we don't have to wonder where Christ is: We know he has risen from the dead. The resurrection is the foundation of our Christian faith. The resurrection is the basis of a new life to be found in a

personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus still calls us by name. Have you heard his voice? Do you recognize him as the risen Christ, the one that can give you new life?

This morning on the altar you will see the flowers that the Sunday school students have made as symbols of the new life Jesus brings. We started out with paper, tape, wire and string; and by putting them together in a pattern we created a symbol of the glory and beauty of God's creation. We see here that all the flowers are not the same, but they each have their own beauty.

In this basket you see flowers made by using the ancient Japanese art form, origami. Making these was a unique experience because the teachers traded places with one of the students and she taught us this lesson. This was going to be easy! I just had to sit back and follow the instructions. Just one piece of paper, no glue, tape, wire or other messy stuff but these turned out to be the hardest flowers we made. Our teacher, Marian Seat, was very patient with us and when we became hopelessly lost in our folds she would smooth out the paper and show us how to start again. That day, I thought, this must be what it is like to humble oneself and sit at the feet of Jesus.

Here I have a daffodil bulb. She was old and wrinkled, just sitting on the shelf in the gardener's shed. She thought: "I know what's going to happen to me. I'm going to be buried in the ground just like those other bulbs and that will be the end of me." Sure enough, one day the gardener picked her up and dug a hole and threw her into darkness. She was dead. Months passed and one day the earth began to warm around the little bulb and she started to stir. Trickle of water reached her parched skin and she began to flesh out. She felt a green shoot pushing through the earth and soon it poked through the ground and lapped up the sunshine and rain. One morning she woke with a trumpet and crown of yellow petals. It was her resurrection body. She never knew she could be so beautiful

and to think that she thought she was dead. No matter how old, wrinkled or blemished we think we are there is always the potential for redemption.

To me it is fitting that Mary Magdalene finds the Risen Lord in the garden and that she mistakes him for the gardener – for isn't that what he is! He nourishes us; he tenderly cares for us. He gently removes the weeds and he prunes us back when we need it. Plants go through cycles and need periods of dormancy in order to gather nutrients for the next cycle of growth. In our Christian life we will go through periods where we may think we are dead spiritually. But we are not dead: we are dormant. And when we least expect it we will bloom again.

If a plant is to keep blooming it must also give off new life. With a bulb this is usually done by removing the new growths from the bottom of the bulb and starting a new plant from each bulb. Just as the women went forth and told the Good News to the disciples it is our commission also to go forth and start new life. The plant that is left to grow on and on without dividing its new growth will end up with many leaves but no blossoms. It will stagnate.

There are those among us and are those in the world at large who need us to give them a picture of Christ by being gardeners. In I Corinthians 3:6-8 it says: "*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he that plants or he that waters is anything, but God that makes them grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.*"

Here we are 2,000 Years later. The message to us is the same: we are to go and tell our story. Some people live in spiritual darkness. Some are locked in like the disciples in the upper room, full of fear and doubt. Others look into the face of every passerby and wonder if this is the person willing to be a traveling companion. Listen to the words of the following

people. Are they people you know? Are they family members? Are they your neighbors? Are they people in your work place. Or could they be people right here in our faith community?

- "I went into business with a friend that friend cheated me. I'll never trust again!"
- "I spent the best years of my life with that man and he dumped me for a younger woman. I'll never love again."
- "I trained for two years for that race and I didn't even get a chance to finish. I'll never risk again."
- "I used to attend church but I found out the church is made up of hypocrites. I don't need others in order to worship."

All of these people are expressing fear and doubt that new life exists. Kahlil Gibran says, "Doubt is pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother." Are we willing to get to know these people well enough to find out what their story is? Can we show them what faith is and walk the distance with them until new growth appears?

My first experience with the Risen Lord was when I was 12 years old. I was raised in the church and naturally joined the rest of the 12 year olds in baptismal instruction classes. Every Saturday morning for several weeks before Easter we met and learned the basics of our faith. Our class was to be baptized in a candlelight ceremony on the Eve of Easter Sunday. It was with fear and trembling I went to my father, who was the Pastor of the Church as well as the teacher of our class, to tell him I couldn't be baptized. I was worried because in a Pastor's family there is always concern for how one's actions will effect the congregation. My father asked me why I couldn't be baptized and I told him that I understood the seriousness of what it meant to make a public acknowledgment that one had chosen to follow Jesus and that I wasn't ready to do this yet. My father took me very seriously and told me that I was wise not to make this kind of commitment if I was not ready. That day my father, who was

also my spiritual guide, showed his faith in me by trusting that I would find my own way. A few years later I took the instructions again and this time I was baptized in the full knowledge that I chose to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Over the years I have had times when I was spiritually dormant, but continued to live in the belief that when the time was right new growth would appear and I would bloom in the fullness of his love.

May we go forth this Easter Day and encourage new life and renewal in ourselves, in our community and in our world.