

The Wilderness is the Birthplace of Joy

John 20:1-18

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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In Hanover, Germany in an old, old cemetery is the tomb of one Henriette Juliane Caroline von Rueling. Born in 1756, she died at the age of 26 and was buried in the *Gartenfriedhof*, or Garden Cemetery, just outside the old city gate. On her tomb is inscribed, "May this tomb bought for eternity never be opened". Now, I don't know the story behind the inscription - perhaps her family feared grave robbers - but what I do know is that their wish for the tomb to never be opened was not meant to be.

You see, at some point in time, the seed of a birch tree landed in a crack between the stones, settled into the soil, and took root. Soon, the tree sprouted and continued to grow. Over the years, it grew stronger and taller, until the powerful tree broke open the tomb and continued its journey toward the sky. The site became known as the "open grave" and was a tourist destination in Hanover for decades, even inspiring a few horror movies.

Today is Easter Sunday - the day we celebrate another open grave and the resurrection of Christ! The day we stand in wonder at the awe-inspiring Creator God who defeated death and hate and violence by breaking open a tomb with the promise of new life, new hope, and new beginnings. Obviously, the open grave in Hanover reminds us of the empty tomb Mary found on Easter morning. Yet, the similarity is not just in the graves themselves but in the miraculous work of God to bring life out of death, hope from despair, and growth from destruction.

For the last six weeks of Lent, we have been wandering in the wilderness as Jesus did after his baptism. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, a barren wasteland where he prayed and fasted and was tempted by the devil. This Lent, we have followed him there, using these forty days to examine the dry and empty landscapes of our souls to find what stands between us and a life-giving relationship with God.

Of course, these wilderness journeys have been very personal - we each have our own struggles with faith and stories of hurt, anger, grief, and doubt. Yet, in this year, our journey has also been communal as we have all lived together through the wilderness of Covid-19. For many in our community, our country, and particularly our world that walk in the wilderness is far from over. Still, Easter invites us to trust that wherever we are on the journey, God is about the work of making all things new.

The Easter story begins in the darkness of early morning when Mary Magdalene wakes up early, dresses herself, and heads out to the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. Mary had travelled with Jesus and seen his amazing power and charisma firsthand. She had listened as he taught about kindness and compassion, justice and love. She had witnessed his acceptance of outcasts and his healing of the sick. She was there as the crowds cheered for him on Palm Sunday and as they cried out to crucify him just a few days later. She watched him carry the heavy, wooden cross on his way to Golgotha. And she cried at his crucifixion, heartbroken to see his agony as his life slipped away.

We can only imagine the wilderness of fear, exhaustion, and grief she wandered in. Aching with the loss of their teacher, mentor, and friend, she and the other disciples had sequestered themselves away from the Roman soldiers and the temple officials. They were in shock and in mourning, the events of the previous days still fresh, still unreal, and still overwhelming.

Yet, Mary felt called to visit the tomb early on that Sunday morning. She walked to the garden and as she approached the tomb, she could see something strange had happened. The stone which had sealed the tomb was gone! She feared that Jesus' body had been stolen, so she rushed back to tell the others. Peter and the beloved disciple ran to see. They entered the tomb and found it empty other than the linen wrappings and cloth from Jesus' head. Confused and excited, they left for home leaving Mary alone again in the garden weeping. Even when she was greeted by angels, she didn't comprehend the miracle. Even when she spoke to Jesus, she couldn't see who stood before her. Not until he spoke her name in a voice so familiar and comforting did she understand that God had broken into the human story with love and life. Where there was death, God had created new life. Where there was hate, God had overwhelmed it with love. Where there was hopelessness, God had cultivated the promise of something new.

Interestingly, only the gospel of John places Jesus' tomb in a garden, or tells us that Mary thought Jesus was the gardener, but it's worth noting as it adds great beauty to a story about resurrecting life. In scripture, so much of God's creative work happens in gardens. At the very beginning of the Old Testament we see how, on the day that God created earth and sky, God created humanity out of the fertile soil. God then planted a garden near Eden, filled it with beautiful trees, and placed humanity there to farm and care for it. Our faith story begins with God creating life out of chaos.

And scripture ends in a garden, as well. In the Revelation of John, after the end times, we read of a New Jerusalem where humanity and God will live together. A river of life-giving water flows through the streets of New Jerusalem and along the river are gardens filled with the tree of life. Again, out of the chaos of the death and destruction, God creates a new beginning, a new heaven and a new earth symbolized by a garden.

And so it is with the garden of the empty tomb. Just days before, Jesus had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane knowing that his life would soon end. He could see the growing movement against him, the animosity among the temple and Roman officials, and the greed of his disciple, Judas, who would soon betray him. This garden was a place of great sadness pointing toward the cruelty, humiliation, and death that were before him. Yet, just days later, in another garden not far away, God raised the broken body of God's Son and planted the seeds of new life.

This has been a difficult year in which wandering in the wilderness has left us all feeling barren and weary. We have battled with depression and anxiety, with fear and worry, with uncertainty and unwanted change. We have missed so much of what gives our lives shape and meaning - handshakes and hugs, time spent with family and friends, rituals, and, of course, worshipping together.

Even as we celebrate today, it doesn't feel quite right. We know that in normal times, we would be in a sanctuary filled with flowers - hyacinths, tulips, and Easter lilies. We would celebrate with music - brass and bells, the organ and the choir! We would dress our children in

pretty Easter dresses and handsome little suits. We would greet each other with all the joy of a great celebration because Jesus Christ is risen!

In many ways, it feels as though we are still in the wilderness, waiting like the disciples hiding in their upper room. Yet, Easter holds a promise for us. Remember, Mary didn't see the resurrection. In fact, no one did. God was about God's work in the dead of night, in a cold, damp cave with no one to witness. As the disciples hid in the upper room, as Mary walked through the early morning to the garden tomb, God was already at work redeeming, restoring, rebirthing, and resurrecting.

And that is the Easter promise. No matter what happens in our lives, God is about the work of resurrection - even in the throes of a global pandemic, even in the soil beneath a young woman's tomb, even in whatever hurt or grief, guilt or resentment, fear or embarrassment we struggle with, even in the wilderness.

Yet, the Easter story doesn't end there. Once Mary recognized that it was Jesus standing with her outside the tomb, she wanted with all her heart to hold onto him, to keep him there with her, to take him to the other disciples, to simply be with him. Yet, he says no, "Do not hold onto me". Scholar Gregory Robbins says about this, "Her story and his, his experience and hers, cannot be anchored in the past. Nor is it singular. Instead, he calls her by name to announce to the disciples - and, by extension to all who would believe - a new creation, an unimaginable future."

As we make our way through this global pandemic, we hear people say over and over again, "When things get back to normal...", "When life is like it used to be." We want to believe that with healing and hope we can recreate what was before. We do this over and over in our lives - looking to the past to define the future. Yet, what Jesus tells Mary is that they can't go back. Rather, he calls on her to move forward, to share the story, the joy, the hope, the promise that is resurrection.

And, of course, he calls us to do the same. We will never be as individuals, a church, a community or world what we were before. Rather, as faithful followers of Christ, we carry with us the best of the past as we watch for the signs of something new - just as we watch our gardens for the first seeds to sprout, the first little green leaves to push their way to the surface. We watch, empowered by the Easter promise as we move into the world as agents of God's love, voices for justice, purveyors of peace, people who live out in our daily lives God's vision for a world in which every child has food and water, every teen knows they are a beautiful child of God, every person is valued regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or anything else. As Easter people, that is our work to do.

And that is this great hope of this day! The wilderness is the birthplace of joy when we recognize that nothing, not death or grief or illness or fear or guilt or even a global pandemic, will stop God's resurrection work in the world. God is always about cultivating the soil of our lives, sewing hope, and creating new life from chaos. May we, like the little birch seed that landed near an old, closed grave, continue to grow in faith and love, persistently pushing past whatever obstacles we may encounter, to reach out into the world with the good news. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God. Amen.