

April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:1-16
Psalm 118:1-2,14-24
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

Easter is the most important feast day of the church year. For many of us, it's also the most *challenging* feast day of the church year.

Easter, with its sunshine and flowers, chicks and bunnies, baskets and eggs—and mostly without the baggage of Christmas—may also be the perkier feast day of the year. But those are secular things, and in secular society, “Happy Easter” doesn't necessarily indicate a connection with Easter as Christians know it.

As much as I enjoy seeing a church full of happy people, Easter is a hard day on which to preach. It's easy to talk about little baby Jesus, newborn in a manger. It's easy to talk about grown-up Jesus, itinerant preacher and healer. But *resurrection*? That's not easy at all.

For Christians, if we set aside all the extras, Easter is about that singular event: the bodily resurrection of Jesus the Christ, after three days of entombment. This is the fundamental profession that birthed Christianity, and we profess it today. It's a profession that requires a cartload of the type of credulousness that most of us would rather not possess in any measure. After all, we're rational people who for the most part take pride in our rationality. For us, the notion of a bodily resurrected Jesus may be a hard pill to swallow. Nonetheless, today my job is to choke down a horse-sized tablet, and then to convince you to choke one down, too. It might be more fun to go put a Peep in the microwave and watch what happens. But let's give it a try.

Are there any dog lovers here today? I've been reading a nonfiction book called *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know*. I'm only partway through it, but I've already learned a lot. For example, regarding dogs' exemplary sense of smell, it has been estimated that the beagle has a sense of smell millions of times more sensitive than ours; “a dog can detect a teaspoon of sugar diluted in a million gallons of water: two Olympic-sized pools full.” The author asks us to “Imagine if each detail of our visual world were matched by a corresponding smell.” On a rose bush, a dog can smell each distinct petal, pollen dropped by bees from far away, the place where a leaf was torn, a dewdrop, and even decay and aging.¹ This is to say, dogs live in a sensory world much different from ours, one that includes many things of which we are oblivious.

On an intellectual level, we all know that dogs hear and smell much better than we do. But to have the facts explained from the point of view of the dog opens up a whole new world that had been hidden. For the last week, as I've walked our two dogs through the sensory cornucopia in our neighborhood, I've tried to imagine it from their perspective. When they leap toward the fire hydrants, I have no interest in joining them with my nose to the barrel. But I do ponder what information they might be gathering. And I wonder what it would be like if we could hear and smell with the same keenness as our sight.

When it comes to hearing and smelling, we are sensory lightweights compared to dogs. Even so, we aren't always conscious of the sensitivity that our human senses do possess. For example, this past week, spring has literally sprung. This is something conveyed dramatically by our sense of sight, and perhaps most noticeable this week by the sudden appearance of flowers on forsythia bushes and ornamental cherry trees. On the other hand, those of us cursed with allergies were notified of spring's arrival a few ago; the *messenger* was the first sinus headache of the season. By the time the sniffing started, spring must have been well underway. Those of us who don't suffer allergies probably didn't notice even then. Clearly, there is an entire sensory world that we are missing.

In today's Gospel reading, the central figure is Mary Magdalene. In her day, women were relatively marginalized even among an already marginalized people. The four gospel accounts of the empty tomb are very different from one another, but they all place one or more women at the center of the events. In all four gospels, women are the first to witness this new reality; they are the first apostles who share it. As is often true, women are the mothers of the movement. In the Gospel of John, it is Mary Magdalene who has personal experience of the risen Christ and who spreads the Word. As one author describes it, the first Easter sermon is this: "I have seen the Lord."² Mary goes forth, sharing what she has experienced, her very words birthing the new community of Christ-followers. In Genesis, God speaks creation itself into existence. At least a little similarly, Mary speaks Christianity into existence. For her efforts, Mary Magdalene has long been known as the Apostle to the Apostles,

The earliest images of Jesus show him as a young man, carrying a lamb over his shoulders, and sometimes holding a shepherd's staff. This Jesus the Good Shepherd is said to be either caring for his lambs or carrying them to heaven. These images are quite similar to earlier depictions of the Greek god Hermes, whose Roman counterpart is Mercury. Hermes could travel easily between the human and godly worlds; he was the guide to the underworld. He was known as the trickster god and the messenger god; he has been described as the god of transitions, the god of boundaries, and the god of liminality.

I think it's okay to use that language for Jesus. Jesus is *our* guide through transitions and past boundaries. Liminality is about the place of where earth transitions to heaven; it's about the boundary between mundane and divine. That's where Jesus and Mary met at the tomb. That's the place to which God invites us. We can approach it, and return, until our ultimate going-over.

Last week I stumbled across a reference that led me to a story from last spring on the Public Radio International website. Let me read from it:

The largest organism on Earth probably isn't a whale or a giant octopus or anything else you might naturally think of first. It's a tree—or a group of genetically identical trees that stretches across more than 100 acres [in Utah].

Called "Pando," which is Latin for "I spread," the group of quaking aspens is considered one of the largest—by area—and most massive living organisms on earth. The quaking aspen, found from coast to coast across North America, grows in groups called stands. Within these stands, a single tree will spread by sprouting new stems from its roots, often several feet from the original trunk.

“Those trees remain connected for a good long while,” explains ... a geneticist with the US Forest Service. “This long process is over many years—suckers [or stems] coming up over a larger and larger area.” Their stems can share the products of photosynthesis, food, and possibly disease as well.

Because individual aspen stems generally live about 100-150 years [the] origin mother stem is likely dead: “The only way the whole clone survives is to send up new suckers,” she says.³

Pando is massive, containing some 50,000 stems⁴ and weighing in at some 7000 pounds.⁵ It’s also ancient: the root system is at least 80,000 years old; it might be as old as a million years. As such, “Pando is extremely old, if not one of earth’s most ancient organisms.”⁶ Individual trees sprout, mature, age, and die, but the root system continues lives on and on, with new trees springing forth.

When I was a youth, I much preferred Science and Math to English and the Humanities. As I experienced it, success was clear in the world of facts and figures, while in the world of words and ideas, the markers of success seemed vague. It’s not really that straightforward, but when life felt chaotic, the orderliness of math and science were reassuring. Over the years, I learned that not every problem can be solved with an equation. My young engineer self has morphed into someone who embraces, if not chaos, then mystery. The world of faith and religion encompasses all other worlds, and all other worlds shed light on the mystery.

Jesus Christ is risen today. Is there such a thing as *too* rational? Dare we let ourselves believe? Dare we let ourselves even hope that it might be true?

Maybe the pill that heals us is not such a hard pill to swallow after all. Resurrection life is all around us, if we have eyes to see it, ears to hear it, noses to smell it, tongues to taste it, and skin to feel it. Jesus Christ is risen today. Whether or not we are ready to profess this foundational tenet of the Christian faith, it is already possesses us. The deep discernment of that mysterious reality is what energizes us as Christian disciples and apostles, learning and doing and speaking, like Mary Magdalene. We have an advantage over dogs, in that we can even “practice resurrection”—we can hone our senses so as to pick up the trails that we would otherwise miss. Do that, and let the mystery enfold you.

My hope here, today is that you experience that which cannot be named; that through sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, you approach the divine, and that you return. Go forth from this place, saying not only, “Happy Easter.” Go forth as Mary Magdalene did, saying, “I have seen the Lord.”

Notes

¹ Alexandra Horowitz, *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know* (New York: Scribner, 2009),72.

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012); in the contribution by Clayton J. Schmidt for Easter Day, John 20:1-18, Homiletical Perspective.

³ Chau Tu, “Earth’s biggest living thing might be a tree with thousands of clones,” May 5, 2015, PRI online, available at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-05-05/earths-biggest-living-thing-might-be-tree-thousands-clones> (accessed April 15, 2017).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Pando (tree),” Wikipedia, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_\(tree\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_(tree)) (accessed April 15, 2017).

⁶ Tu.