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DURATION

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:02] Speaker1

Good morning, everyone. Happy Easter. And boy, I've got to tell you, the second pandemic, Easter, is a tough one to preach. Let's just say the Easter mood does not come easily to me this year. It's hard won, which is a shame, because I desperately want it to come easily to me more than ever, I think I need a resurrection this year and maybe you feel the same way. I have noticed within myself more and more these past few weeks and months a really deep well of longing. A longing for the ones that I miss, a longing for clarity and certainty that I used to be able to take for granted, for the ability to plan something with confidence for the future, for a world without so much violence, for a world without so much destruction and selfishness and pain and hate, where we actually treat each other as the beloved kin that we are. Yeah, I have a pretty deep well of longing for all of those things, and I am more in touch with that. Well, then I maybe have ever been. It had me as I prepared to preach an Easter message, deciding it was time to go back straight to the source. This week. I spent some time reading through the stories in the four gospels of the Christian New Testament, the stories of Easter. And what caught my attention? In all of those different versions of that story was the one moment early on Easter morning before the news.

[00:02:14] Speaker1

Before the resurrection was known. The women in Jesus's life get up early on Easter morning to go to the tomb and put yourself in their shoes for a moment, picture what that must have been like that morning. The previous Friday, their dearest friend had been murdered two days before their dearest friend had been killed by the authorities in public brutally. They were deep in grief, picture it right, you are sitting there angry, bereft, and you these women, you have spent all day Saturday with nothing to do but sit in that rage and that sadness while everything was closed for the Sabbath, you are still in shock. This was your beloved friend. A friend who taught you so much, who was a leader in your community, you had such hopes for the future that you were building, you devoted yourself to this work that all of you were going to do together, this healing, miraculous stuff. And then out of nowhere, one day, he was picked up by the authorities and killed, brutally murdered for all to see. The grief that you would be feeling in that moment, I'm sure, would be so deep. So then you plan to do the one thing you can do finally after Saturday is over, you set your alarm, you plan to wake up as early as possible on Sunday morning because at least you can do something.

[00:04:20] Speaker1

Then what needs to be done in this horrible circumstance? A memorial, a memory, a preparation in one final act of love of your friend's body for burial. In the gospel stories, the women arrive as early as they can at the tomb at sunrise, and I picture them just putting one foot in front of the other. I picture them with red, puffy eyes, dehydrated from all the crying broke down. I've heard from so many of you that that is how it feels right now sometimes that you're just putting one foot in front of the other. After we have lived a year of pandemic, after we have lived more than one year of horrific gun violence, of racist hate crimes, of murders at the hands of the authorities in our own day. Some of us are just putting one foot in front of the other and trying to do what we can do. We might be able to relate more than we think. And so these women arrive at the tomb and suddenly. An angel appears to them. And turns everything upside down again, saying, why do you seek the living among the dead? Why why do you seek the living among the dead? What must have been like for that to sink in? Right, what are you saying? What are you saying? Our friend is dead. Why do you seek the living among the dead? And the angel's share the news that Jesus has risen.

[00:06:23] Speaker1

Gosh, it must have felt dangerous to hope in that moment. When so many other things had been taken away, the women in the gospel stories it says struggled with it, each gospel here actually has a very different version of what happens next, which is so interesting. Some gospel stories said that the women were terrified, they were afraid, and they told no one other gospel stories said that they told everyone immediately, but no one believed them. How afraid everyone must have been to get their hopes up. But it was true. None of Jesus's friends, none of the people he loved in that moment had any reason to expect anything that morning except for more death and more of the same. They had no concept that there could be another way out, another way to win this fight against the evil powers in their world. No concept that there could be another way to live and to find life after so much pain and struggle and hardship. But here it was. I was right in front of them. They all had to open their hearts and their minds to it because it is made clear to us as readers and the gospel stories that they're resurrected. Friend did not look the way they expected him to when two of his followers, Jesus, his followers meet him resurrected on the road to a mass. When Jesus is seen standing on the shore by the fishermen.

[00:08:15] Speaker1

When Mary herself greets him in the garden outside the tomb, none of them recognize him. None of them recognize him at first, apparently their newly resurrected friend, he is still love and joy and God incarnate just as much as he had always been. But he shows up unfamiliar in a new form, a new form that's not even described. Maybe that's part of the challenge for all of us of seeking out resurrection, because we think it will be recognizable. We think it will be a recreation of what had been a return to the way that things were before the loss, before the death. But if we are to believe the story that we tell this weekend, every year, resurrection is not as simple as that. Resurrection is not a time machine. We do not see Jesus back in the manger reliving all of the greatest hits of his ministry. Right. Instead, we are told that we cannot look for the living among the dead. We cannot find new life in what is past. Only in what is to come only, in fact, in an unfamiliar form, which might be scary and confusing at first. But which we will find is alive and on fire. With love and life and God incarnated. I got my first dose of the coronavirus vaccine two weeks ago, and I know many of you also have if you have not yet heard the good news in the state of Pennsylvania, every single person aged 16 and older will now be eligible to receive the vaccine this month on April 19th.

[00:10:31] Speaker1

After some amusing back and forth between the nurse and I at the Philly Convention Center, when I got my vaccine, I asked her to give me the shot in my right arm in my tattoo. Actually, some of you know that I have a lot of tattoos. This was actually the second one I got. And it is my largest tattoo. It covers my entire right bicep. People often don't know what to make of this tattoo, especially once they find out what I do for a living. You can see here it is a tattoo of an old traditional church building. And it's on fire, it's burning. I actually got this tattoo early in my ministry as a sign and a reminder to myself not to make the forms of religion into an idol. To be open to the unexpected and the unfamiliar ways that the spirit shows up. At the base of this burning building, you will see in my tattoo is also a burst of sunflowers. You might know that in nature, scientists call sunflowers phyto mediators, which is a very fancy way of saying they clean the soil, they actually have the ability to purify the ground, lifting toxic materials like lead and heavy metals up from the ground. After the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear disasters, officials, this is true, officials planted vast fields of sunflowers to absorb the radiation and prepare the damaged soil for a new life.

[00:12:27] Speaker1

It's one of the most effective and gentle ways. To heal the ground and who would have ever thought that that's how resurrection of that soil might come about after something as terrifying and awful as a nuclear disaster, that the cure would be found in a simple sunflower? In an opinion piece for The New York Times on Friday, a New Testament professor named Asao McCauley wrote an article comparing the Easter story to the story we have lived this year. And reminding us to stay open to resurrection in unexpected forms and not just that, but to remind us that we are all in need of resurrection. He said, as we leave these terms of quarantine, thank God, as we leave these terms of quarantine, a return to normal would be a disaster unless, he says, we recognize we are going back to a world that is in need of healing, a world that is in need of resurrection. I find my resurrection mood, my Easter mood. It shows up when I start in that place. When I wonder, with an open heart. What are resurrections might look like, whether they are personal in your life or whether you also are thinking about our collective need for healing and resurrection? What unfamiliar forms might that take? I want to close with a story from a colleague and a friend of mine, the Reverend Molly House Gordon.

[00:14:36] Speaker1

Who told us all about a memorial that she went to officiate last year? A small graveside service in a neighboring town from where she lives in Missouri, over the border in Kansas. The memorial service was for a beloved elder in her congregation, a woman named Sue, and during the service, Molly said the family had decided that they wanted to do a ritual, that after each person shared a memory of Sue, they would pick up a sunflower from a big bucket because Kansas, Molly said, and add it to the gravesite. Well, as the family assembled that morning. Amidst the tears and the sadness of such a somber occasion. Molly noticed that Sue's, two year old great granddaughter, was there. And as soon as she saw the bucket of sunflowers. She squealed with joy. When the remembrances began later in the service. Molly said my small, self-appointed coefficient began to. Sue's, eldest son was the first to speak. And when he had finished sharing memories of his mother, he laid a sunflower by her gravesite. And the two year old saw her chance, she crept up slowly to the flower and snatched it and took off through the gathered family of mourners. She went first to her grandparents and with the concentrated carelessness of a toddler, Molly says she tore petals off of that sunflower in chubby little handfuls and presented them to grandma and grandpa.

[00:16:43] Speaker1

Molly says we were all unsure whether to be horrified or charmed when a toddler gives you something, you take it. So there they sat, whose son and his wife clutching handfuls of sunflower petals. The service went on and the toddler went on to. Every time someone would speak and leave a flower, she would fetch the fresh flower like it was her one job and leave the torn one behind, she traveled through the entire crowd distributing sunflower petals into helpless open hands. And by the end of the service, there was a very sad pile of headless sunflower heads stacked upon one another next to the open gravesite, empty and bare. And there was also a crowd of faces. Their eyes wet with tears, bemused and sad and joyful and shining. Every single one holding open palms of sunflower petals. Molly says loss is very real and yet. We may also be startled to find ourselves sitting in its midst with handfuls of sunflower petals. With bright memories and love filling up our hands and spilling over the edge. To carry with us. Into the next day. My friends, this Easter may resurrection show up for you in unexpected ways, and may we all remember not to shut down the presence of Divine Love, even if its form is unfamiliar to us. Maybe today you feel ready to plant some sunflowers, to purify the soil around you, but I hope you remember that if the planting is too much.

[00:19:09] Speaker1

Feel free to just receive whatever big, messy, torn up clumps of bright joy are dropped into your helpless open hands. May we be grateful for them? And may we continue to remember that there is still so much life? Here to be lived. Among the living. Amen, and may you live in blessing. I invite you to join me this morning in the spirit of prayer. God of the uncertain times. Presence that is with us

when we don't know what is coming, when we are afraid maybe to hope for something good because we know so much can go wrong, because we know so much can be lost. On this Easter morning. May we hear the angels when they ask us a question? When they ask us where we are putting our attention in this moment. When they encourage us to look in new places. To see an unfamiliar version as just as on fire with the holy. As the thing that we miss. As the thing that we love. God, in this world where we trust that the most high power is love. Help us remember that that means love cannot die. And is with us in this moment as much as any other. For the prayers that I've spoken out loud and for the prayers that everyone gathered with us holds on their hearts. We say Amen.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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