

Christ Is Risen Indeed!
Dorothy Whiston
April 12, 2020

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

On a typical Easter morning, this joyful, liturgical call and response would reverberate around the globe among followers of Jesus gathered in worship. On a normal Easter across our country, some would congregate on a hillside at dawn, while others would later crowd into churches dressed in their Easter finery, perhaps before an Easter egg hunt or a lovely brunch. Christians everywhere would be filled with eager anticipation as we gathered to celebrate the most audacious news ever uttered: Death has been undone! The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

But today, this good news does not come to us as usual because our world is nothing like usual. We are living in chaotic and frightening times, with death all around. Our lives have been totally disrupted, with the paradox of total uncertainty and utter sameness taking over. We're grieving the loss of things as mundane as not being able to go out to dinner and as profound as not being able to gather with loved ones to mourn the death of family or friends. Our own earthly mortality stares us in the face, uncomfortably close.

On top of all that, or maybe I should say underneath it, the raw underbelly of our society is now more exposed. We can better see how very many people have no homes to find safety in, nor access to decent health care when they almost inevitably get sick. Millions of people no longer have jobs, nor the savings to see them through this economic crisis. Our prisons have become even more deadly than they already were. And, of course, people of color suffer the most.

Sadly, things are probably going to get some worse before they get much better, here and throughout much of the world. And we really have no idea what a new normal will look like when it comes. Yes, these are dark and grievous times in many ways. And not at all conducive to our usual celebration of Easter.

But, I wonder. . . . I wonder if this year we might be able to experience Jesus' rising from the dead at least a little more like the first witnesses did. If this year we might enter into Easter with a vulnerability we sometimes cover over with sentimentality or complacency.

The disciples who discovered the empty tomb were, after all, living under occupation by a death-dealing empire. Their dear friend, spiritual teacher and trustworthy leader had just been executed on trumped up charges. And most of them had failed to stand by him for fear they might be next. Definitely dark and grievous days.

The resurrection stories themselves are actually pretty stark if we read them closely. Mary Magdalen came to the tomb in the dark. When she saw the stone had been rolled away, she was undoubtedly upset and afraid. She assumed someone had taken Jesus' body and she ran off to get help. Peter and John then rushed to the empty tomb, went in briefly and immediately headed home again, presumably also in some state of shock and distress.

They left Mary standing in tears outside the tomb, lost in grief. First an angel appeared to her, then an as yet unrecognizable Jesus, both saying, "Woman, why do you weep?" "Woman, why do you weep?" . . . "Humankind, why do you weep?" Clearly, God cared about Mary's pain and sorrow . . . and God cares about ours today. In Matthew and Mark's stories, God's angels comfort the shaken women at the tomb with the words, "Do not be afraid." Clearly, God cared about the women's fear and anguish . . . and God cares about ours today.

Our world today is filled with fear and sorrow. But like Mary, it's while standing in our pain that we are perhaps most likely to become aware of the presence of the risen Christ. Christ is right here in the middle in our sorrow; Christ accompanies us in our fear; Christ stands with us when we don't know which way to turn. Sometimes the Christ presence is recognizable -- as a palpable comfort or an ineffable hope. And sometimes the risen Christ is so hidden we experience only a tomb-like emptiness. Yet that very emptiness is also space for transformation in Christ.

In the gospel resurrection story, it's when Jesus spoke Mary's name -- it's in their personal connection -- that she came to recognize him. How dearly we long to hear our loved ones speak our names, maybe especially when we can't see them face to face. And how tenderly the Christ Spirit speaks our names, day in and day out, with each breath we take. If we'll listen deep inside, we, too, will hear the Spirit of Christ calling us by name, calling us to new life. Sometimes this voice of Love resonates almost audibly in our hearts. Other times it comes to us as the sound of silence. But holy Love always speaks our names.

Still, the resurrection story doesn't end there. Almost as soon as Mary experienced the reassurance of Jesus' speaking her name, he told her not to hold on to him and sent her off on her own. While this seems pretty harsh, I believe Jesus was warning Mary -- and is warning us -- that things can never go back to the way they were before. He was telling her -- and us -- we must let go of what came before and go out and meet the unknowable future, as disorienting as that may be. Resurrection is like that. Heck, garden variety growth is like that.

Finally, Jesus gave Mary a mysterious message, "I am ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and your God" and told her to carry it back to the disciples. Somehow, this simple direction from the one she trusted so completely was enough to motivate Mary to break the good news to the world. It's really always trust, and the hope that grows from it, that give purpose to our lives. It's in our belief in the ultimate goodness of our loving, life-giving God that we find the strength and the courage and the focus to move ahead in our ever-changing world.

Neither Mary nor any of the disciples actually understood much of anything on that resurrection day. They were in shock, bewildered, grieving, and afraid. John's gospel even describes them as huddled behind closed doors, locked in by themselves, waiting without knowing exactly what they were waiting for. Sound familiar?

The disciples, like all of us who seek to follow Christ, had to go by the Way of Unknowing and wait for any understanding to come in bits and pieces. Some of what they would learn challenged everything they'd ever known, leaving them bereft yet again. And sometimes got things terribly wrong, but that didn't matter.

The disciples then, like us today, were called to enter into a Holy Mystery that was not meant to be solved, but that would give them the resolve to reach out and connect with others in new ways. To love one another in ways that would actually make them, and us, more truly human.

We don't know what's going to happen over the next several months. But we do know that the risen Christ is here with us. We can stake our lives on God's promise of new life revealed in Jesus' resurrection being at work in the world, always and everywhere.

The Jews of Jesus' time wisely did not separate the heavens and the earth the same way we modern Westerners do. They saw the heavens and earth as an intertwining whole, interacting all the time and everywhere. The earliest Christians knew the risen Christ to be the Alpha and the Omega, the origin and the fulfillment of creation. Resurrection, with a small "r", is going on within and all around us, all the time.

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr says resurrection is the incarnation – and really creation itself -- taken to its logical conclusion. If indeed, God inhabits matter, then matter is somehow eternal. Science tells us that nothing is ever lost, only transformed. So resurrection is part of the natural order of things, as well as the supernatural and miraculous.

We are all meant to participate in the resurrection of Christ. Not just in the end time when all creation comes to fulfillment, but right now as God's love brings new life into this world. Even in a world where uncertainty, fear, sorrow and death itself strip away life as we've known it, the power of Resurrection in Christ has the final Word of Life.

For Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!