

BETTER THAN NORMAL

John 20:1-18

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The Bible begins and ends in a garden. In one of the creation stories in Genesis - the first book of the Bible - God places human beings in a garden, a place where there is abundant life. Adam and Eve are given work to do - important, meaningful, satisfying work - caring for all that God has created.

In the book of Revelation - the last book of the Bible - we find God's presence described again in language that is lush, rich, and nature-filled. God is found in a place where there is the tree of life, a tree planted by a river, and "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." We used that verse throughout the Lenten season as we explored different aspects of healing.

Humanity flourishes in a garden, God's presence is felt in a garden, because what better symbol could there be of vitality, of growth, of life itself?

When I visited Israel with a group from this church, we saw the place believed to be the location of Jesus' tomb; it is now a church, and - as you can imagine - a very popular tourist destination. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is dark, crowded, and chaotic inside. Several different Christian denominations lay claim to the church; inside it's divided into sectors. I respect that many people find it a moving place to visit, but I kept thinking that it seems to represent an unfortunate aspect of Christian heritage - it is a place where our divisions are on display.

We also visited a place called the garden tomb. Historians and archeologists have disproven the authenticity of the garden tomb, but I found it meaningful. Even

though I knew the garden tomb really wasn't where Jesus was buried, it still felt like a spiritual place to me. There, I could better imagine what that first Easter morning was like for Mary. I could picture the sunrise, the mist, the dew settling on the plants and trees.

Mary arrives with a job to do, to prepare Jesus' body for burial. She isn't just sad, she's traumatized, after what she witnessed on Friday. The death of a person she loved and admired, the one around whom their lives had revolved. A torturous death at that. She knows she'll never forget what it was like to watch Jesus slowly suffocate, dying of thirst, in excruciating pain. That's literally what the word "excruciating" means - its origin is the word "crucifixion"; to be nailed to a cross is to suffer that kind of pain. He was betrayed, he was abandoned, he faced trial, he was mocked, he was laughed at, he was beaten until his skin was raw, and then he was crucified. And his friends watched it. Mary watched it.

She's there on Sunday morning but only physically. She can't really think yet, isn't allowing herself to feel. When she sees that the tomb is empty, she understands it as just one more cruelty, one more humiliation, one more indignity. She immediately presumes that Jesus' body has been stolen by his enemies who don't want to allow a proper burial. It's easy for her to believe, after all she's seen. After all she's seen, it's not at all hard to believe bad news.

It never really is, is it?

I've had dozens of people say to me, "Kelly, I just can't buy the Easter story." But no one has ever said, "I just can't buy the Good Friday story. I can't believe that Jesus was put to death." I've never once had to try to convince someone that the events of

Thursday and Friday really happened. It's not hard for us to imagine that Jesus would be betrayed, even by someone close to him. Or that his friends would abandon him when he needed them the most. We know that the justice system isn't always just, trials are rigged. We know that good and innocent people suffer. All of that is credible.

It's not hard to believe that bad things happen. Bad things happen to bad people, and to good people. It's the good news that stretches our imaginations.

In her traumatized state, Mary can't begin to think that anything good will ever happen again. First, she sees that the tomb is empty. Then she sees two angels who say to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Then she sees a person, a person she doesn't recognize who says to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

John tells the story this way. Thinking this person was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him. Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'" And in that moment, when he speaks her name, she knows who he is. And she believes. She believes that goodness has prevailed over evil. Love is stronger than hate. Hope cannot be buried. Death does not have the last word. The last word is always love.

She thinks he is the gardener, because that's what he is. Jesus is the one who plants seeds of justice and compassion, joy and purpose, in her, in the disciples, in all of his followers, in those who listened to him, and in those who were healed by him. The risen Christ is the one who plants hope in each of us, the one who longs for us to believe that we can find abundant life.

Over the past several weeks, as we have begun receiving our vaccines, person after person has said to me, “I’m so ready for things to get back to **normal**.” Church Council made the decision to resume in-person worship on Memorial Day. As we discussed it, members talked about craving **normalcy**. I understand that sentiment.

Doug and I received our first vaccines on a Friday. We hadn’t known until the day before that it would be possible, so we didn’t have much chance to think about it. It had been a busy 24 hours; I never gave a moment’s thought to how I would feel emotionally once that first shot was in my arm. As we drove home that day down Lake Road, I felt as if a cloud had lifted. A cloud that I’d become so accustomed to I hadn’t realized it was there. I started thinking about how much we’ve all been in survival mode this past 13 months, hunkered down. We’ve grown accustomed to our masks, to not looking one another in the eye at the grocery store. We aren’t surprised any more when events are postponed, changed or cancelled. We’re used to the bad news by now. That day on Lake Road, I felt hope.

We all want to return to a world where we can make plans, hug our friends, be in worship together. We crave that kind of normal. But on this Easter Sunday, as we read again this familiar story of the most wonderful amazing news of all, what if we set our sights beyond normal?

On this beautiful day, in the midst of this service with joyous music and glorious flowers, I don’t need to recite for you all of the aspects of normal to which we do **not** want to return...you know what they are. Bitter divisions, polarization, blatant racism erupting into physical violence, persistent poverty, climate change, struggles with mental health and substance abuse.

The good news of Easter calls us to imagine a world where we do better. We're not going back to the garden of Eden, a perfect idyllic place, but Jesus the master gardener wants to plant in us seeds of justice and compassion, so that we will transform the world we have into one that looks more like God's realm. A place where all people are treated with dignity and respect, where we care for the earth, where differences are aired with calm listening, where every single person lives in the realistic hope that their lives can improve.

Would you have believed, 13 months ago, in all that has been accomplished for good in this year? That teachers would have found ways to keep their students engaged, even as school shifted from week to week, in-person, online, hybrid. Would you have believed that this Houston doctor, Joseph Varon, would work for more than a year without a single day off, because he is so dedicated to fighting COVID? And he represents so many health care professionals who have given sacrificially of their time and talent - including many in our congregation. Would you have believed that a vaccine would have been created and distributed in record-setting time? Or would it have been just too hard to accept news that good?

The writer N.T. Wright says that "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project - not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but - to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about." The story of the resurrection is meant as a wake-up call, just as spring is the earth's wake-up call. Don't just mumble those words to the Lord's Prayer every week, Easter says to us. Do you realize what you're saying, what you're praying? "We want God's will to be done.

We want earth to be like heaven.” Do we really believe that’s possible? What else is worth devoting ourselves to?

We weren’t created for normal; we were created for **transformation**. The caterpillar is a fine creation, but the butterfly takes our breath away.

When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through the risen Christ, and the result is that the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. That is the promise of Easter. We can be so much more than just normal. We can claim the hope of Easter and make our lives and our world extraordinary as the spirit of love and compassion, hope and justice permeate the air like so many spring flowers.

If we allow our lives and our world to return to normal, we will have missed out on everything this time has taught us. More significantly, we will be missing out on everything Jesus is trying to teach us. Normal isn’t good enough. Normal allows for there to be huge gaps between those who have and those who will never have. Normal allows for trips to the grocery store to become experiences in terror. Normal allows for bigotry to run unchecked.

Normal is also easy. It’s easy to slip back into accepting that “it’s just the way things are.” It’s easy to settle. Extraordinary is hard. It’s risky. Jesus confronted the powers of evil in his day, and it led him to death on a cross. He challenged the status quo, he made people mad, he disrupted, he questioned. He took risks for the sake of a greater good, so that everyone would know that the God in whose name he lived is a God of justice and compassion.

A few years ago, a young man named Mason visited Poland with a school group. He'd arranged ahead of time that he and one of the chaperones would leave the group one day, one of the days the group was near Auschwitz. They had a side trip to make. This is Mason's story. His grandparents both survived Auschwitz. They had been married just three weeks before they were deported to the camp. When they arrived, they were separated. Every evening, Mason's grandparents would meet at the fence that divided the women from the men. His grandfather would try to sneak his grandmother some bit of food he'd hidden, a crust of bread, an extra potato.

But then Mason's grandmother was transferred to a farm outside Auschwitz. There the Nazis were doing experiments on rabbits, trying to find a cure for typhus. The rabbit farm was managed by a Polish man who noticed that the Nazis were feeding the rabbits better than the Jewish slave laborers and other inmates. The rabbits were receiving better quality food, better attention, better care, than the human beings. The farmer began to secretly slip food to the prisoners whenever he could.

One day, Mason's grandmother cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire, and the cut became infected. It wasn't a serious infection, but it required antibiotics and that, of course, was forbidden. The Polish farm manager saw the situation and decided to do something about it, the only course of action he could imagine. He cut his own arm open, and he placed his wound on her wound so that he would become infected, and then he went to the Nazis and said, "I'm one of your best managers. This rabbit farm is very successful. If I die, you're going to lose a lot of productivity. I need medicine." They gave him medicine, he shared it with her, and she survived.

When Mason was on his field trip, he went to see the man who saved his grandmother's life, making his own life possible. This man is still alive, living on the outskirts of Warsaw. A man who didn't settle for normal. Normal wasn't at all good. He risked his own life, and probably that of others, doing something extraordinary so that compassion and hope would prevail over the Nazi death machine.

He made earth a little more like heaven.

We weren't created for normal; we were created for **transformation**, for lives that are extraordinary so that we can make this world the vibrant and abundant and diverse garden God intends.

The Easter story affirms for us that it is God's will for us to thrive, to take risks - as Jesus did - for the sake of others and a greater good. The Easter story affirms for us that death, evil, hatred and suffering do not have the last word. The gardener is alive, and is ready to plant seeds of resurrection hope in you and in me. Christ is risen indeed.

Let us pray. Holy God, creator of every garden and every life, today we rejoice in this story. We picture you taking our weary world into your arms and breathing life into us again. May the power of the resurrection transform us into people who take risks for your sake, so that all people might know of your love. In the name of the Risen Christ we would pray and live. Amen.