

Soteria, a ministry that practices resurrection, serving those in our community impacted by incarceration and lack of financial literacy and education, used our sanctuary for the funeral of one of their graduates and woodshop workers this past Monday. Ten minutes after it was to begin, I was asked if we could move the communion table to see if we could put the casket down front. Don looked at me and said, "Pastor, we haven't had a casket in here since I've been here, as most people have been cremated." Another staff member, who shall remain unnamed, upon hearing the news that an open viewing was about to take place, quickly exited the sanctuary. Rituals and feelings for burying the dead. We all have them, don't we? So did the people in Jesus' day. And when you bury someone in a tomb...in a grave...you expect them to stay there...dead. But that is not what happened very early on Easter morning in today's story. The reality the women expect is not the reality that they encounter three days after Jesus had died an excruciating death on the cross...three days after the women had stayed and watched and traveled with his body to the tomb and saw where they laid his dead, lifeless body. Three days after... the women were now returning after Sabbath to anoint Jesus' body with burial spices...and his body was gone; the stone rolled away from the tomb. "It is no use pretending at this point that we are surprised- we already know what they will find when they enter. But don't let your familiarity of the scene hinder your attention to Luke's unique details" and to the Holy Spirit (*Feasting on the Word*, Nancy Clare Pittman). Before reading God's word, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 24:1-12.**

Try and imagine their shock! They enter the open tomb and find that Jesus' body is gone. Are their eyes or minds playing tricks on them?! After all, it was dark, and they were tired and surely they weren't seeing clearly. All we're told is that the women "didn't know what to make of this" (v. 4). This response echoes other biblical stories of those who find themselves disoriented by the mysterious work of God in their midst. Though these women had been around Jesus a long time, what they didn't expect **was that not a sealed tomb- not even death-** could hold the power of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Regardless, whatever thoughts or feelings were going through their grief-stricken minds were interrupted by the sudden appearance of two messengers in gleaming, bright clothes standing beside them (4b). The frightened women bowed their faces low to the ground, and the two men addressed the top of their heads asking, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised" (5b-6a).

We sometimes rush past this part of the story where we're invited to take in the silence and the fear and awe. Here we are reminded that God's ways are not our ways; they are beyond our understanding. They flip our expectations; they demand the impossible. They are holy precisely because they are not of our own making (Pittman). "Why do you look for the living among the dead?," the messengers ask the women. Now that's a question that'll stop you in your tracks! When I hear this question, I wonder how they heard it. "We are just as guilty of such a fruitless search, aren't we" (Pittman)? Notice that in their fear, they bow their heads to the ground; they're looking down. Why do you

look for the living among the dead? It's the angelic challenge to both our souls and our communities of faith. "We too want to tend the corpses of long dead ideas and ideals. We cling to former visions of ourselves and our communities of faith as if they might come back to life as long as we hold on to them. We grasp our loved ones too tightly, refusing to allow them to change, to become bigger, smarter, or stronger. We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safe and malleable and we can predict what will happen. **The words of the unworldly messengers are a challenge to stop hanging on to the dead and to move into new life. They remind us that the Holy One dwells wherever new life bursts forth**" (Pittman).

But it's not always easy, is it? Andrea, who is interning with us this year, sent me an interesting Easter reflection by Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian and educator. He shares that during a difficult time in his life he began to understand a hard but liberating truth about resurrection: "figurative forms of death-in-life can bring us a perverse sense of comfort, while resurrection- the hope of new life- can feel threatening." Palmer goes on to say, "Sometimes we choose 'death-in-life': unhealthy relationships, closed belief systems, resentment and anger, heartless politics, substance abuse, hopeless stagnation...because we fear what might be asked of us if we embraced resurrection-in-life." He continued, "I know this for certain: as long as we're alive, 'choosing resurrection' is always worth the risk. My Easter wish for everyone is the ability to say, 'Yes!' to life. Even when life challenges us, it is a gift beyond measure."

Yes, questions and doubts fill our lives, especially when we talk about the resurrection. They more than likely filled the women's minds and hearts as well that first Easter morn...just as it did the male disciples. Some of us as Christians feel the pressure that we have to have it all figured out. But when it comes to Christ's resurrection, it is a great and powerful mystery. And in Luke, the mystery is noticeably thick. "For today, though, these intrepid women from Galilee are the real deal. They stuck around at the cross. They showed up at the tomb. They go from perplexed, to terrified, to preaching, within a short period of time. They had hope in the midst of their struggles. They remembered what Jesus told them before he died and are no longer looking for the living among the dead. A greater truth has broken through. Death is now the idle tale. By the power of God, the dead don't stay dead. In many ways the truth of the cross is closer to home than the resurrection. Now resurrection... that's little more slippery. A God who brings life out of death is unpredictable...destabilizing" (Caitlin Trussel, March 27, 2016). I cannot prove resurrection any more than another preacher. Nevertheless, I hope and believe because I've seen it too many times not to. "Resurrection is an unwordable story of God and Jesus and us: an experience of the beyond breaking in, the reality of love and life and justice and joy no matter the power of death. One story, a single angle of vision, can't begin to explain or communicate it" (Diana Butler Bass, Sunday Musings blog). Whatever happened on that morning a long time ago, it keeps happening — to me and to millions of others in thousands of ways in a multitude of times and places. I'm less concerned

about what happened then than how we experience and practice resurrection now.

I believe in the resurrection, and I don't understand death's ongoing cruelty. I hope and believe because the power of God is greater than death, even when it feels to be an idle tale. I've seen it here at Triune over and over again in the last almost two years I've been serving here. Resurrection happens when someone gets housing after many years living on the streets and in and out of shelters. Resurrection occurs when someone celebrates two months of sobriety after years of addiction. Resurrection is when someone finds a new lease on life along with their voice after years of being abused and told that they weren't worthy enough. Resurrection takes place when someone sees themselves and others with God's loving eyes- forgiveness is offered and relationships are restored. One scholar put it this way: "Resurrection is not some buoyant ideal, unconnected to the real world. It is an invitation to live as Jesus lived, a doorway to a life in which meals are shared with enemies, healing is offered to the hopeless, prophetic challenges are issued to the powerful. On that first dim Easter morning, when women cowered in the dust and angels picked them back up, pointing them out the door of an empty tomb into the full light of morning, the power of God was no longer unspoken. No matter that the others did not believe at first. No matter that Peter had to test the women's story by running to the tomb, seeing for himself the linen clothes, and wondering all the way home about what he had seen" (Pittman).

This past week I had the privilege, along with 1600 people, to hear Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and author of *Just Mercy* speak at the United Ministries' luncheon. Wow! He blew us all away and challenged us to get to know those at the margins. Like the messengers, he reminded us to hope and do justice as people of faith. He shared a beautiful story about his grandmother's powerful reminder of love, even up to and after her death. It reminded me of an interview I heard a few years ago with Mr. Stevenson and Krista Tippett. Tippett asked Stevenson about the formidable relationship Stevenson had with his grandmother. He said, "She had a very long view. I think she understood the power of an eternal witness. That's the thing I appreciate about my grandmother. She actually interacted with us in this way that was meant to be eternal. I think she was brilliant at achieving that, in both the things she said, but also in the things she did, including the instinct for creating these memories that just shape you for the rest of your life (*On Being*, Dec. 3, 2020). That's what the women in today's resurrection story did. Upon instructions from the messengers, they remembered that Jesus had told them he would die and rise again. Isn't that the way of hindsight? They remembered and then they witnessed to the resurrection; they were the first to preach the gospel of the risen Lord, creating memories that shaped those to whom they told the story of God's loving and redemptive work in the world. What memories do we recall so that we learn to seek the living rather than the dead? Because he lives, our lives are shaped by this epic story of faith and hope. So, why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here! He has been raised! Don't

you remember what Jesus said?! Even if you're like Peter and wondering about what you've seen or heard or if you're sprinting for the exit doors...Friends, the good news of Easter will find and claim us! "God is busy making all things new, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has opened that work to everyone who wants in on it" (Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*). Pay attention and have hope for this is holy ground. Like the Christ of the empty tomb, we will also rise. This is the promise of resurrection. Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed!** O Happy Day! Happy Easter! Alleluia and Amen.