

“The Bible: New Beginnings”
John 20:1-18

There has been a lot of memes with the picture of the little bulldozer trying to help free up the huge ship that was stuck in the Suez Canal. The magnitude of the problem and the small size of the bulldozer make it seem like the odds are so great against any of the efforts of the little bulldozer. Here are a few examples of the memes: Giant ship: My Covid depression and anxiety, Little Bulldozer: Going on a daily walk. Giant ship: My tasks. Little Bulldozer: Me, dutifully chipping away at my tasks.

That is how faith may seem against the odds of life. What can the simple efforts, feelings, or thoughts of faith do against all the evil powers and of suffering in the world? This question is at the heart of the Easter message. The resurrection of Jesus gave his followers the hope and vision they needed to carry out his mission. The deep experiences of faith of only a handful of followers had a worldwide impact. I imagine that it would have been hard for his disciples to comprehend the impact their faith would have on the rest of the world. Their experience of the resurrection of Jesus seemed small and inconsequential compared to the powers of the world around them. In addition, the first witness to the resurrection was a woman. In that time and culture, the witness of women would have been discounted by most of society as unreliable.

There was a lot of hesitation and uncertainty among the disciples about the resurrection. They struggled to find their way through this new experience of faith and they of course had no idea that people around the world would be inspired by their witness. Their doubt, their uncertainty, and their courage were all important parts of the story. All of it was used to turn the wheel of history in the direction of love. After the crucifixion of Jesus, it was hard for his followers to know what to do. That seemed to be the end of their journey with Jesus. They seemed to have lost their hope. In fact, in our Bible story for today from the Gospel of John we see Mary Magdalene going to the tomb to mourn. But even when she and some of the other disciples did not find the body of Jesus there, she was not expecting to see Jesus at all. She thought that he was the gardener. She was in such mourning and pain. Even though in that culture the appearance of the dead was to be expected for the first 40 days after death, Mary who was one of the close disciples of Jesus, somehow did not recognize that possibility. After she saw the angels in the tomb, she still was not expecting anything beyond that. What she was expecting was that somebody had stolen the body of Jesus. The imagery in the story gives us a huge clue. First, we have the image of darkness: “While it was still dark.” This was a reminder that a new thing was going to be born. In the Gospel of John, Jesus brought light into the darkness of the world, just like God in Genesis brought light as an act of creation. The second clue is that of the gardener. Mary thought that Jesus was the gardener. The garden was a foundational image in the story of creation in Genesis. There are many other symbols in this story, and they all point us in the direction of a new creation, a new beginning for the world. The resurrection is about always trusting that a new beginning is always possible, even when we find ourselves at the tombs of the world.

Each of us has the capacity to be a part of those new possibilities when we focus our energies on love. I am reminded of the story of a school teacher who accepted the volunteer position of visiting and teaching children who were in-patients in a large city hospital. She was retired and decided that this was what she could do in her retirement. One day the phone rang and she received her first assignment as a new volunteer. The teacher on the other end of the line was the classroom teacher of a young boy who had been hospitalized and needed tutoring during his stay in the hospital. It was not until the visiting teacher got just outside the boy's hospital room that she realized he was a patient in the hospital's burn unit. She was prepared to teach English grammar, but she was not prepared to witness the horrible look and smell of badly burned human flesh. Everything around her made her want to hold her nose, to turn around and to leave faster than she came. But something inside her kept her from walking away, so she clumsily stammered over to his bedside and said simply, "I'm the hospital teacher and your teacher sent me to help you with your nouns and adverbs," and she began to teach. The next morning when she came to work a nurse from the burn unit rushed up to her and asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher began to apologize, but before she could finish, the nurse interrupted her. "You don't understand. We've been really worried about him and his condition has been getting worse over the past few days, because he had completely given up hope. But ever since you were here with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed and he's responding to treatment—It's as though he decided to live! What did you do?" When the nurse later questioned the little boy he said, "I figured I was doomed . . . that I was gonna die . . . until I saw that teacher . . ." And as a tear began to run down his little face, he finished: "But when I saw that teacher, I realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy . . . would they?"

We rarely get to know the impact of our faith on the world, but Easter reminds us that each act of love and care has a tremendous impact on the lives of others. The story of God's love is not finished yet! And the resurrection of Jesus is not about a distant event in the past that we admire and remember. It is about the hope and love that are being born in and through each of us. This is the hope which Mary Magdalene and the other disciples received in their experience of the empty tomb. Each one of us here is invited not just to get or give information about the great story of the resurrection of Christ. Each one of us is called to practice resurrection every day of our lives. Easter reminds us that whatever challenge we are going through, it is not the final phase. Love continues to unfold and our work is to be conduits of that love.

Lectio Divina Revelation 21: 1, 5b

"I looked again and could hardly believe my eyes. Everything above me was new. Everything below me was new. Everything around me was new because the heaven and earth that had been passed away, and the sea was gone, completely... See, I am making all things new. Write what you hear and see, for these words are faithful and true." Amen.