

When Sunshine SERMON – When Sunshine Enters the Darkness BY REV. DR. KRISTINA STONE KAISER

By a show of hands, how many of you love someone? Mind you, it doesn't have to be romantic love...It could be...but it could also be love for a family member or a friend. How many of you love someone? Take a look around at all the hands in the air. Love, as many of you have come to know, is something that tends to grow deeper over time. There's something comforting about being with people we love. It feels good. We look forward to returning to those familiar faces when we've been away. In fact, I can remember how it felt when Dominic and I were just starting to develop that kind of a relationship. I was working at Perkins, and when I would see him standing at that podium, waiting to be seated, it was like sunshine had entered the night. I could see those blue eyes shining from the other side of the room, and I would feel this happiness in my entire body – which is still true even 3 decades later.

Love is why we gather. Love is why we grieve on Good Friday. And love is the reason that Mary and the disciples were drawn to the tomb on Easter morning. In fact, if we can turn our attention to Mary in John, chapter 18 for a bit, we can see that love and grief are hopelessly intertwined. Her grief is so deep and so strong that nothing is registering. She sees two angels sitting where Jesus' body has been, and it doesn't even register. Now, if we think back to Christmas time, we often talk about angels visiting Joseph and Mary and the shepherds in the fields. In almost every case where people see angels, we hear that they were gripped with awe. But here is Mary Magdalene seeing two angels, hearing two angels talk to her – and she can't even register it. She responds to their question, turns away and sees Jesus. Actually sees Jesus, but even that doesn't register. She doesn't look into his eyes and melt into his presence with relief and joy. Her whole being doesn't fill with sunshine. She's so deep in her grief that she mistakes him for a gardener, begging him to just tell her where they've put her Lord. It's not until Jesus says her name that she is able to wake up.

Now...people have studied things like this. And what we now know is that saying a person's name can be incredibly powerful. It turns out that our names are central to our identity, and we're conditioned from birth to respond to our names. And in fact, this isn't just true with our names. If you call for "mom" or "dad" in a room of parents, you'll see any number of heads turn as they respond to that identity. I've even seen it in shows where a person in the military isn't quite present to their reality, and as they're trying to get through to the person, someone will say, "Use their rank." And so they'll call them Private So-and-So, and the person will suddenly return to the present.

Jesus does this very sort of thing with Mary on this first Easter morning because –here she is. Her body is wandering around, doing all the things but she's not really there. She's seeing miracles with her very own eyes, but she's not really seeing them. And so Jesus says her name..."Mary." It's even punctuated there with an exclamation mark. "Mary!"...which suddenly brings her into the present moment – fully there, seeing Jesus with full clarity, which causes her to respond with, "Rabbouni!" a term that was used to communicate a deep personal relationship and profound reverence.

But until that moment, Jesus the Christ was right in front of her, and she could not see it, could not perceive it. Now...How often do you suppose that is true for any one of us? How often are we so caught up about the events of the past or the possibilities of the future so completely that we have no idea what's really happening right here and now in this moment? How many times has it been that Jesus the Christ was in our midst – but instead of lighting up inside as if the sunshine had entered the night, we missed it?

I came across a reading a couple of weeks ago from a Sufi mystic named Ibn Arabi on the subject of "Subtle Remembrance." The reading refers to God as The Real with a capital R. And it speaks of The Real as being always there, even when we forget. He speaks of The Real using words like "quiet warmth" and "gentle

awareness.” And he ends the reading by inviting the reader to connect again by saying something like, “Here You are.” Or, “I remember.” This reminded me a bit of a speech I once heard from Valerie Kaur, who comes from the Sikh (S-i-k-h) tradition. She asked a question in that speech that has stuck with me for many years now: “Is this the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb?”

I’ve found this to be a profound question. We often say that Jesus was laid in a tomb. But three days later, he was resurrected. He experienced a rebirth. He was both who he had been and also something completely new. What we thought we knew was that Jesus had been laid in a tomb. But in truth, he was about to emerge reborn. And in some mysterious way, this is meant to happen to us in both big and small ways all the time. How do we even begin to grasp that? ...For me, I often find it helpful to turn towards nature for inspiration.

Take for instance the seed. Just a couple of weeks ago we sang the song, “In every bulb, there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree...” something else that is yet to be fully seen but is happening all the same. Sometimes as part of my day-in-day-out work, we ask people, “What’s a seed, a bud, and a bloom in your life?” And if we begin with the seeds, these are usually our prayer requests – those things where we are leaning into with our faith and our hope – as Jeff talked about a couple of weeks ago. Jeff said, “Hope is what we do when we need help from something outside of us.” And if we give that some thought, what do we do with seeds? We plant them in dark soil. Are they going into the tomb or are they going into a sort of womb? It’s dark there, and we can’t see anything yet. It’s hard to know what’s happening or how long it will take or what the finished product will look like. And even though we’re doing our part – we’re giving the soil water, and we’re keeping the soil warm, we don’t know if anything will happen or not. In fact, when that seed first bursts open – we don’t even know that it’s happened. We can’t see anything until that little shoot finally pops out of the soil.

And that was true with Jesus. No one knew what was happening in the dark. They were doing their part. They brought the spices. They brought the linens. This is what we do: We tend, we tend, we tend. But we don’t know. But then there are the buds – that moment when this little new life shoots into being, and we get really excited, right? We don’t even fully know what this will be yet, but we’re so excited anyway. I’ll tell you a story. I was 7 months pregnant when they sent me in for an emergency ultrasound. They said, “You have too much amniotic fluid. This isn’t right.” And so, away we went, scared as can be to the ultrasound room - where I got really hot -because it turns out you shouldn’t lay on your back when you’re super pregnant because it puts too much pressure on veins and things that carry blood up and down your body. So I’m like, “Whew, it’s so hot in here.” And the technician says, “What do you mean it’s hot in here?” And Dominic says, “It’s actually pretty cold in here.” And suddenly, the technician is like, “Get on your side, get on your side!” And I had no idea what was going on, but later on a nurse friend of mine told me, “They were worried you were going to pass out.”

So all that happens, and we go back to the doctor, and he says, “Everything’s fine. Nothing to worry about. It’s just that your baby is about 7 pounds right now.” And I said, “What?!” Because I’m only 7 months pregnant. We have 2 months to go yet, and last I checked, 7 pounds was about the size of a newborn baby if all goes well. So I say, “Well, if she’s 7 pounds now...” And the doctor says, “Don’t think about it.” And I said, “Well, the thing is – I am thinking about it.” And the nurse, apparently able to stand it no more, blurts out, “You can expect the baby to grow a half pound every week from now until the baby is born.” Which causes me to say “What?!” To which the doctor replied, “What did you expect? Look at who you’re married to!”

And I bring all of this up to say, “The bud.” It’s still just a little hint of energy. We still don’t fully know what is yet to come, but something new is there, and we’re really excited about it. And that’s sort of where they are on that first Easter morning as Mary realizes that her Rabbouni is standing there in front of her.

In our own lives, truth be told, because there is still so much uncertainty, these buds often still bring us to that place of prayer. We continue to feed and water, doing what we can in the here and now while also asking for God to be a part in all of those ways that we don't quite understand. And this goes on for some time until the bud becomes a full bloom. By this time, there is much available to us that can be seen, and there is much under the surface –the intricate root system that is continuing to deliver life and goodness to this full blooming thing.

And what that bloom represents is what we might call “fullness of life” – the thing that Jesus tells us he came to give us: John 10:10 – I came that you would have life and have it to the full. I came that you would have abundant life. The bloom can be found all over Jesus' words to us. In John 15 he says, “I am the vine, You are the branches. Remain in me, and I will remain in you.” If you do this, you will thrive.

We hear in both Mark 1:15 and Luke 10:9, “The Kingdom of God has come near.” The Kingdom of Heaven has come near...but the question we are asked in places like Mark 4:12 and Matthew 13:14, “do we perceive it?” The gratitudes of our lives, the joys of our lives are right there, right in front of us, but how often do we find that we are hopelessly stuck in the past or fretting about the future?

And this goes on for some time until we reach the moment where the plant will return to the ground – return to the womb to be reborn again, fertilizing something that is yet to come, something that is not yet seen. This is the great cycle of things. Rebirth – resurrection in big and small ways all the time. We wake to a new day, we inhale – bringing life into the body, exhaling, releasing that which has been spent and used up, that which is not needed for our survival. New jobs, new places to live, new additions to the family...The ends of jobs, the last turning of the key, the absence of people we love in our pictures.

...And so the question I call us to today is: Where are you?

When I heard Ibn Arabi's reflection on remembrance, it led me to write in my journal: God, am I here with you? Or are You here, and I am not? I don't believe it is that I am here and You are not. Where are you? What is here? In contemplative circles, sometimes we call this the “Just This.” It will always be the case that what is in the past will be what has allowed this Just This moment – this rebirth moment – this new breath – this life renewed. When we live into the Just This moment, we can then ask, “What is here for me to tend to right now? What does this moment need?” The Just This moment allows us to see Jesus, to say, “Here You are.” “Here we are –here together.”

It's the “Just This – Here – We – Are” moment that lets Mary know what to do next. Jesus says, “Go. Tell the others.” Jesus says, “We can't stay here.” This moment doesn't last forever. Life will always be transitioning into the next moment, but it takes intention for us to allow ourselves to be in the Just This moment.

And so, as we are gathered here this morning, celebrating our risen Lord, might we all put ourselves in the position of Mary. Whatever preoccupations we bring with us this morning, whatever is in the past that is troubling us, whatever is coming up that we are fretting about, there is something really special and miraculous right here and now in this moment. Can we live into the full bloom of this moment now? Will you hear Jesus calling your name this morning? And as we continue on with our celebration service, as we prepare to take communion, when we hear the word “Bread of Life” and “Cup of Salvation,” will we hear our name and be filled with sunshine because we are in the Presence of the One we Love and the One who loves us?

Our Rabbouni.

Let us pray:

Lord, as we sit with the image of the seed, the bud, and the bloom this morning, as we celebrate together and look to be guided and surrounded by Your Love, would there be a moment today where each of us is bathed in the sunshine of Your Presence. May it be, may it be, may it be. In Jesus' Name, Amen.