

Easter 2011 and Flower Ceremony

April 24, 2011

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

*We are here,
after a week of cold rain and rare sun
to celebrate Easter, the ancient feast of spring.
Here on the common earth we worship,
here in the north, yes, blossoming with flowers,
but everywhere, everywhere in the world
blossoming with dreams of liberty,
and a longing for real living, real loving.*

And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.

Thematic Sentence: John 19:41

There was a garden near the place where he was crucified, and in that garden was a tomb in which no one had ever been laid. They placed Jesus in this tomb.

Hymn: When Mary Through the Garden Went

(Flowers are brought forward)

The Sequence---Exultet for Easter 2011: *the following text was spoken in unison, then read by Mark slowly, as interpreted by our movement choir*

**Love, love, when you wake us,
when you hold our face
 in your hands,
we want to rise up into the real air of your
 touch and laugh at everything
that is not the law of happiness.**

**Drenched in the sun,
we are nowhere else but here.**

words from my good friend Kim Vaeth, 1999, from *Her Yes, After the Cold War*

The First Reading comes from Marianne Sawicki, a professor of philosophy at Penn State, and a rather brilliant scholar in early Christian origins. This is from her book *Seeing The Lord*, 1994.

Resurrection, in first-century Jewish thought, was expected as part of the new age that was going to begin. Opinions varied as to the scope, or whether it would happen at all. But the notion *intended* a MASS resurrection, a resurrection to a restored life here on earth, and *not* the singular privilege of someone who would appear alone here after his own death, and then disappear all together. Thus the culturally available image of “rising of the dead” was not a good fit for the case of Jesus. He was forced into that mold, a mold with considerable warping.

What then was happening with Jesus before the women brought forth their story that he rose up and left his tomb empty? His body was being recognized in the bodies of other genders, classes and ethnicities than his own, leaking through the cracks, getting around the borders. Jesus didn’t need an empty tomb until he became the fulfiller of prophecies.

The Second Reading is from the ecstatic poet James Broughton (*the Rumi of America*, in my opinion) from his collection *Lauds*. This poem is exactly 30 years old.

I am the old dreamer that never sleeps
I am timekeeper of the timeless dance
I preserve the long rhythms of the earth
and fertilize the rounds of desire.

In my evergreen arboretum
I raise flowering hopes for the world
I plant seeds of perennial affection
and wait for their passionate bloom.

Would you welcome that sight if you saw it?
Revalue the view you have lost?
Could you wake to the innocent morning
and follow the risks of your heart?

Every day I grow a dream in my garden
where the beds are laid out for love.
When will you come to embrace it
and join in the joy of the dance?

Sermon

So today is Easter. Our English word for this day, Easter, is somewhat unique in the world. It distinguishes us from most other languages spoken in the world. In Greek and Bulgarian, today is called Pashka, in Russian, Paskha. In French, Pâques. In Italian, Pasqua, in Indonesian, Paskah, in Norwegian Paske, in Spanish Pascua, all of which

come from, some of you will have guessed, the Hebrew word for the Jewish freedom holiday, Passover, Pesakh. Some linguists think the German word for Easter, Ostern, is related, but they're not quite sure how.

But in English, it's Easter, which sounds an awful lot like the direction *East*. Which makes sense, because a man, now called the Venerable Bede, who lived in the 700s back at the very beginning of our language, asserts that the word Easter comes from Eostermōnath, or the Month of April, named, he thought, for a long forgotten goddess of the dawn, and thus of the East, named Eoster. We have apparently never found supportive evidence from anyone else in England to support what he says. We have, at most, a lot of conjecture at this point.

In a few other languages, like Czech and Polish, Easter is called, by words that translate, "The Great Day," or even, "The Great Night." And in Serbian and Japanese for example, today is simply referred to as "Resurrection day."

Resurrection is a word that predates Easter by a long shot. Egyptians, Greeks, some Asians and even some liberal Jews in the first century, called the Pharisees, all spoke of it. (More conservative Jews in the days of Jesus, the priesthood in particular, thought it was a rather nutty idea.) For some, resurrection was a symbolic, or even a political expression, but, for others, it was literal hope of a return from death, as real as rain.

But as Marianne Sawicki points out, for the Jews who did believe in the concept, it was *never* used in the singular. Never. It always referred a whole group of people rising up at the same time. There was no privilege given to any particular person. It was never going to be one great big round stone rolling away from the mouth of a tomb, but *all* of them, together. At the same time. And so, Sawicki says, the creators of the resurrection stories in the gospels had to distort the original idea a great deal. "He was *forced* into that mold," she writes with power, "a mold with considerable warping."

Then, Sawicki asks the following amazing question, and answers it: "What then was happening with Jesus before the women brought forth their story that he rose up and left his tomb empty? His body was *being recognized in the bodies of other genders, classes and ethnicities than his own*, leaking through the cracks, getting around the borders."

The empty tomb story is a later addition to the story of Jesus. As Sawicki says, he didn't need one until he became a fulfiller of prophecies, that is, until his followers tried to find biblical allusions to give meaning to his tragic death. Jesus' body was probably "buried" by being thrown into a common pit, like everyone else who was executed in those days by the Romans. By forcing such a humiliating conclusion, the Romans eliminated the necessary mourning rituals of family and friends of the deceased, a cruel finale to an awful death. This loss of a mourning site was especially terrible in the ancient near east, with its proud traditions of women taking care of the bodies of, and ritually mourning, the dead. Men had little to do with such things; their grief was often contained and suppressed by strict cultural conventions. Women, however, were the ones who washed the bodies, anointed them for burial with scented oils, wrapped them in cloth, and did the

public mourning. They were often trained from birth to weep together in public ceremonially, almost like a choir of tears. In many Mediterranean cultures of the present day, including my own ancestral culture, this custom has still not died out.

And it's from this tradition of mourning at tombs that the first Easter stories stem. Traces of these ideas are found in the gospel stories of the women coming to the tomb of Jesus to wash and anoint his body. Other traces of these ideas are found in the gospel stories that have come down to us. People only recognizing this risen Jesus *in the bodies of other people who are still alive*. Like the story found in the Gospel of Luke about the dusty traveler...a stranger... walking along the road. Like the nameless cook making breakfast at the beach found in John. Like the stranger who eats a bit of honeycomb with them in the Gospel of Luke. The most famous example among these Easter stories is the one in the Gospel of John where Mary of Magdala interprets a poor slave, that is, a gardener, as the risen Jesus. The gardener, in fact, is taking care of the very garden where Jesus' tomb was, according to John.

Gardens. Not something I know much about. I live in a loft downtown. Oh, I grow a few kitchen herbs...rosemary, mint, tarragon... on my balcony rail, but I am not Mr. Greenjeans by any means.

But, as someone who reads a lot for his work, I do recognize the literary *meaning* of placing the tomb of Jesus "in a garden." The image of the garden is found at the very beginning of the Hebrew scriptures, the well-known Garden of Eden. When the author of John places the tomb in a garden, it's not geography, but a reference to the original mythic garden. The mythic garden where the tree of life used to be. The tree of life...the fruit of which would keep people from dying. Keep the flowers from dying. Keep everything the same. The Garden of Eden, in short, was a magic garden.

A garden just like the one in our story this morning. A garden where the plants and flowers never droop or die. Where the rabbits won't do what comes naturally and eat the lettuce; where the produce is gigantic, and glows in the dark. Where all of our wishes and whims come true. Where nothing changes for the worse, ever, and nothing is lost, ever. A fantasy place.

And, a place, I am sorry to say, where I often live sometimes myself, thinking in my heart that death is not something that is ever going to happen to me. I am aware that I often think of death as a surprise, some trick. It's never expected...even when I am expecting it. Thinking of it is always a subject to be avoided.

But in the Easter interpretation of the Garden of Eden, there is no tree of life in the center of the garden. There *is*, however, a *tomb* at the center of the garden. Death is thus declared as part of the garden cycle. No flower blooms forever. They all wilt eventually. Death is part of life.

The older magic garden with its tree of life, does not exist any more. And, the Easter story suggests, we were probably right to leave such a garden, that is, leave the notion that things last forever, or that we can have the world as we like it.

The Easter story adds another detail, however. It says that the tomb is empty. In other words, although death is part of reality, it is not as powerful as life. Life, as the flowers reveal to us every spring, always blooms again. Just as life always rises again in new people being born, year after year. These children grow and become new adults over time. They are alive. They change.

The dead never change, however. Death is the chief example of changelessness in the world.

But life is growth. Life is risk and freedom. The garden of life grows and blooms in the spring each year, and we bring them to this table every year on Easter, a thousand flowers in common vessels, a magnificent sight. The poet James Broughton asks us this in his poem, *Gardener of Eden*:

*Would you welcome that sight if you saw it?
Revalue the view you have lost?
Could you wake to the innocent morning
and follow the risks of your heart?*

He speaks of what it means to plant a garden:
*I raise flowering hopes for the world
I plant seeds of perennial affection
and wait for their passionate bloom.*

In other words, the flowers, though they don't last forever, will come up again next year. They will look much the same, but they will be growing in the mulch of flowers that grew before them, and are rotting into rich soil. Those new flowers on the table next to me aren't the same flowers as the ones which were here last year, but they are just as beautiful, just as diverse, just as stunning and just as fragile.

And it's this insight which provides me with a way to see Easter these days. It's a celebration about life and death. It's about, in fact, the life and death of an ancient teacher, and his relationships. But it's not just about his relationships. It's about your relationships and my relationships. It's about your life and death, and it's about *my* life and death too.

Here's how I have been seeing it. Here is the comfort...the "flowering hope," to use Broughton's image... that gets me through the day, the weeks and the years.

I say that, right now, you do not see all of me. You only see the present form of me. Part of me has already died. Part of me is already gone. Where is the fellow who was composing this sermon last night? Gone! Where is the boy of six who played at mud in

his grandma's rock garden? Gone! Where is the factory worker in Detroit making springs for Dodge trucks, or the sculptor fashioning figures out of terra cotta in college? Gone? Where is the happy man in a long relationship of love? Gone. Where is the shy, skinny teenager walking the halls of the house at 15414 Springgarden Ave in Detroit? The house is still there, I suppose, but who knows who is living there now. I'm not, that's for sure. The "me" that lived there is dead and buried in a tomb of not very clear memory.

Let me make it more clear. If I suffered a car accident and lost my leg, would I lose "me"? If I lost my address, as I have many times...with every move...or lost my hearing, as my doctor tells me I am, would I be losing the most essential part of me, the most alive part of me?

It seems to me these days, as I think over my life, that the most important, that is, the most alive, parts of me are invisible. They cannot be placed on a scale. They are not my addresses, my phone numbers, my body parts, my formerly brown and long hair, or my present blood sugar count. These visible things all change, and eventually all of them... every single one of them... will pass away. But my love for my son, Tony, my love for my mother Elisa, my love for my sister Lynne, or my cousin Sergio; my love for my friends Richard, or Doug or Kevin or Kim, is the most real part of me. I have planted these seeds of love in the garden of the world. I water them daily with attention and care. Even if I have to weed the garden now and then...some friendships simply end...I still see the garden growing. The blossoms opening. Not the same as last year, but alive, and beautiful...and connected by love to the most alive part of me.

When it comes time for me to die, I have every intention of dabbling in a bit of resurrection myself...not of my body, but of the love I leave behind...the best part of me, the seeds I've sown for potential harvest one day. You won't recognize me...I may look like a gardener then, or a cook making breakfast on the beach, or dusty traveler, a stranger going down the road. Who knows? And it's not important that you recognize me by name...after all, that's not very important either in the scheme of things. I could change it even today with a stroke of a pen, and then who would I be? No, I am not even my name. But I am alive and my aliveness will keep going once I'm gone.

The ancients were right when they joked, "You can't take it with you." No, not at all. You have to leave it right here. The echoes of the love, devotion, kindness, healing, forgiveness, and justice work that you leave behind are the most alive parts of you. As far as I am concerned, neither my ego, nor even my memories and hopes, are more important than the quality of the relationships I am woven into over the years.

Jesus of Galilee was executed, and his body was thrown into a pit, most scholars say, on the day we now call April 7th, 1,981 years ago. But when Bishop Tutu conducts the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, or Dorothy Day opens a Hospitality House, or my Mennonite friends choose hospital work and refuse to kill in war, or the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee sends help to Japan or Haiti, or people from this congregation help resurrect a shattered New Orleans or research for our

BREAD organization the problems of our shared community, I wonder why anyone thinks that so weak a thing as death on a Roman cross can silence such a life.

So call today Easter if you favor English, or Pashka, or Pasqua, or just the Great Day. Don't look now, but you might at least begin to hear the rattle of many, many stones rolling away from the tombs in the garden of this world.

I close with the inimitable Broughton:

*Every day I grow a dream in my garden
where the beds are laid out for love.
When will you come to embrace it
and join in the joy of the dance?*

Offering

We who have been blest with this place
may also choose to bless it.
We who have been blest with our lives
may also choose to live lives of gratitude
by sharing the responsibility
for this, our common house of spirit.
By electronic means of the modern era,
or by the ancient spiritual practice of the offering, we give and bless.

The Flower Ceremony,
established by Norbert Capek

Consecration of the Flowers, *adapted from the words of Norbert Capek*

Jolinda Stevens, Religious Education Director

Spirit of Life
let these flowers speak to us this morning
of our lives here upon the earth.
Our lives beneath the sun,
beneath the rain,
beneath the stars.

EAST

May they remind us, amid diversities
of gifts, and diversities of knowledge
and feeling, to find strength in our
differences, and unity in our common
desire to live just and happy lives.

SOUTH

May they remind us of the value of true friendship, where we may share the realities of our hidden heart, and support each other.

WEST

May they make a portrait of a cherished community, where distinctions are expressions of beauty, not sources of anxiety.

NORTH

May we never compete with each other, but cooperate together to build a future of peace, justice and freedom for all.

Let these flowers remind us that it is not important what we look like, or whether our efforts are great or small at any given time, but that nevertheless, all of us are in this together.

EVERYONE (LED BY JOLINDA)

Now kindle the flame wherever sorrow reigns. Tell the stories of those who overcame their troubles. Breathe in the flowers of faithfulness, the air of love. Join your heart to the hearts of all who suffer. Let wounds heal, and eyes shine again with joy.

(words from a Flower Ceremony hymn by Norbert Capek)