

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on April 4, 2010 (Easter)
Crossroads United Church

John 20:1-18

A colleague once shared with me a story from his student internship days that I have not forgotten with the passage of time. He told of being summoned to a small hospital in rural New Brunswick to offer prayer for an old man who was dying. The hospital was silent as the few patients admitted were long asleep; the eerie stillness punctuated only by the rasps of the old one, not long for this world.

My friend prayed for the life and soul of the old one at death's door and then chose to remain in the room so that he need not die alone. I don't know how much time elapsed but the moment of expiration came and the old one exhaled his last. At the precise moment that the old one left this world the sounds of a newly born baby crying in his or her first breaths was heard down the corridor. The cries were quickly hushed, and then silence once again reigned supreme-save for the ticking of the old one's watch.

An old one dies, and a new one is born and the beat of time marches on. The itinerant preacher and healer is hailed as king, crucified as a traitor to Rome and Jerusalem and placed within a hollowed out tomb. But the march of time suggests that every second is pregnant with potential. Things can change in a heartbeat and are not always as they seem. Death is transformed by life. Grief is dispelled by joy, and despair usurped by hope. I will not stand among you on Easter Sunday in the year of our Lord 2010 and simply whitewash the horror of Calvary and Good Friday. Neither will I insult your intelligence by suggesting that since morning dawned in the garden on the first day of the week following the feast of unleavened bread some eons ago that life is perfect.

The dawn of Easter cannot obliterate from our memory the agony of the slaughter of the Son of God. Neither do the first rays of sunlight on Easter morning dispel the reality of suffering and disappointment for all time. The enigma of suffering and injustice and the

calamity of natural and unnatural disaster will continue to niggle and perplex in our personal lives, and in the unfolding history of the world. And like Mary in John's account we too can be blinded by grief in the wake of circumstance. Our tears can blind us so that we do not recognize who stands among us. And in our grief in the wake of tragedy we too can make assumptions that are reasonable, but wrong!

An empty tomb does not immediately spell resurrection, but grave robbers! "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." And she does what is expected when extenuating circumstance has exacerbated her grief. She weeps. She weeps for what might have been if only there had been more time. She weeps because one that she loved has been taken from her by death. She weeps because the future is now uncertain. She weeps because her saviour is dead, and now even his body has been further desecrated by being stolen! The sun rises on the first day of the week following the Passover and it is not to shouts of alleluia but to the sobs of a broken woman!

Twice she is asked why she weeps: first by angels inside the tomb and then by someone that she supposes to be the gardener. She is so blinded by grief and confusion and remorse over not knowing where the body of her beloved Jesus is, that she does not recognize in whose company she now stands. And she is asked a second time, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Finding the requisite composure necessary to respond she answers that if he has any knowledge of the whereabouts of the body could he kindly apprise, and then she will become responsible for his earthly remains. And then he calls her by her name, and she recognizes in whose company she stands. For Mary of Magdala, hearing was the catalyst to faith.

In hearing her name she recognized the Lord and she began to run to embrace him. But Jesus seems to halt her from embracing him. He does not want her hold onto the Jesus who was, but to comprehend the Christ who is! She is given instruction to find the disciples and she does as she is bidden. She tells them that she has seen the Lord! First she heard, and then she saw, and is it not similarly so for us? We hear the gospel presented in story, song and sermon and we respond in faith. And having heard, we then

begin to see- to glimpse with both the eyes of the body the Christ among us, and with the eyes of our souls deeper truths inherent within gospel and circumstance. And we discover that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a chronicle of both triumph and tragedy.

His life has a beginning and an ending and a subsequent new beginning. And just as there was persecution and ongoing challenges for the disciples of Jesus Christ, so we must remember that authentic life and living will have its challenges for us. And what the resurrection does is to give us hope in light of disappointment. It gives us new eyes for seeing the pinpricks of light when we find ourselves in a long dark tunnel. It gives us the ears to hear the angelic hosts proclaiming Glory to God in the highest and Hallelujah he is risen even when the gravity of some situations seems to attest otherwise. And the risen Christ of the empty tomb instructs us not hold onto the former things, but rather to embrace and acknowledge the new. The counsel to the grieving woman Mary was to not cling to what was, but rather to go and share what she has heard and seen. The commission to Mary is the commission for all believers: hear, see and share!

The good news of the gospel and the power of the resurrection lie not in certainty but in hope. Death has not ended; not everyone gets cured of his or her disease and we live in hope of justice for all. There is a not yet quality to faith, but the hope of the resurrection gives us new eyes for seeing. We can go to the tomb like Mary and expect death but we encounter new life. Things are not always as they seem on the surface. Blessing sometimes comes with an unseemly face.

The story is told of a young man returning from a walk in the woods where he had found a beautiful white stallion. The townspeople said to his father, "What good fortune for your son." To which the father replied, "How do you know that it is good?" One day when the young man was riding the horse he was thrown and broke his leg and the horse ran away. And the townspeople said "What bad fortune has befallen you; your son has broken his leg and lost his horse." To which the father replied, "How do you know that it is bad?" Following this there was an edict from the emperor that all able bodied men were to respond to a call to arms. The young man was not able to respond because of his broken

leg. The entire army was defeated and there was not a single survivor. The young man survived because his broken leg had saved him.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the truth that things are not always as they seem. Death is transformed to life. Weeping gives way to joy. Seeming endings birth new beginnings, and every second is pregnant with potential. Resurrection people do not expect that the skies will be always blue. We will continue to experience loss and disappointment. The selfishness of some will continue to boggle our minds as we continue to hear of persons receiving large bonuses when others have seen their pensions threatened. People that we love will be felled by disease and disaster and our faith will sustain us even if our loved ones die. This is the power of the resurrection. We continue to embrace life as gift even though our hearts have sustained cracks and fissures. And it is not in naiveté.

Easter people are not Pollyanna's who always see the bright side. Easter people wrestle to see the pinprick of light in the dark tunnel. Easter people dig through the rubble to find signs of life. Easter people grieve the deaths and honour the lives of those who are innocent victims. Easter people do not go through life with rose coloured glasses. Easter people acknowledge and respond to injustice with compassion and integrity because this is what Christ would have us do. We do not get to stand at the tomb and weep. Neither are we given the latitude to hold onto what was. We do not cling to the Jesus who was. We look to the Christ who is.

An old one dies, and a new one is born and the beat of time marches on. The itinerant preacher and healer is hailed as king, crucified as a traitor to Rome and Jerusalem and placed within a hollowed out tomb. But the march of time suggests that every second is pregnant with potential. Things can change in a heartbeat and are not always as they seem. Death is transformed by life. Grief is dispelled by joy, and despair usurped by hope. May God grace us with ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts to respond to the good news of resurrection! Thanks be to God! Amen.