

April 14, 2019 – Easter Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 20:1-18; Isaiah 52:1-2, 7-10

How Beautiful

You all look so nice today! I see pretty dresses, and bow ties, and some snazzy suits. I can see that you took extra care getting ready to come to church today. And have you noticed the choir, and their special attire? Our choir usually goes with a classic uniform: dark blue gowns, but today they have dis-robbed. Choir, your outfits look great, on you.

It's a bit of a different look for us today, we're not usually so fancy. Nowadays many churches, ours included, have become more relaxed about what is worn when coming to worship. It's a fine spring day (finally) but if it were even warmer I would tell you that, yes, you can even wear shorts to church here. (We don't have air conditioning.) This more casual dress code is not because we are casual about what we believe, but rather to underscore something we do believe, firmly: church is a place to come as you are. That's the way to be in the presence of God: as you are. God doesn't care about pantyhose, or beat up tennis shoes. God does not judge by outward appearances, God looks at the heart. Being a place where people can dress casually, even raggedly, can be a means of hospitality and a statement of acceptance—God's acceptance—for we are all ragged before God.

All that being said, something about Easter Sunday calls out for finery, in some form, a little flair, maybe a hat. Which is a little odd, in terms of Easter itself, if you think of how it must have been, on that very first one, those long centuries ago, what people must have looked like that morning. Frightful, would be my guess—and the gospels concur. Everyone was frightened, terrified, distraught. Certainly not well rested. Their eyes would have had deep, dark circles beneath them. Their faces would have been puffy from weeping. The women hadn't considered who would roll the stone away, let alone thought to run a comb through their hair. None of the men shaved. And Jesus? We often think of the risen Lord as being radiant, but you have to remember, he had just been through hell. That had to take a toll on his appearance. I think today's gospel reading from John may hint at this, noting as it does, that when Mary Magdalene encounters Christ in the garden outside the tomb, she doesn't even recognize him; she thinks he's a gardener. Why would she think this? Was he holding a shovel? Pushing a lawnmower? Maybe she thought he was a gardener because he was covered in dirt, the grime of the grave, the weary marks of the way to death all still smeared upon him.

What he had been through was ugly, so very ugly. Sometimes I think we skip past that, too quickly on Easter, and so miss the point, or mute its power. In the brightness of this Sunday morning we forget about that Friday afternoon when the sun refused to shine. But Easter wouldn't be Easter without it. It would not be Easter without all that happened before: when friendship was deserted, when justice was perverted, when innocence was slaughtered, when God's own being cried out in dereliction, when hope was buried, deep within the earth, when hope itself was stopped up in a tomb and sealed off with a boulder. That's what happened, in those days leading up to this day, God went through hell. God went to hell—as the creed reminds us. “He suffered...was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell.”

It is good to be reminded of this, on Easter. It is good to state this, together, to make this creedal confession, because life is not always pretty, even when it's 70 degrees and sunny. It may be Easter morning, but you may be grieving the loss of a loved one, or the loss of more than one loved one. You may be grieving the loss of people who have died, or the loss of people who are still alive but not here, not at family gatherings, not in your life. You may be grieving a loss

of health, or a loss of health in someone you love, wondering, in light of this diagnosis, what life will be like going forward. You may be grieving the unbecoming words left hanging between you and another person. You may be grieving our public discourse, the unbecoming words that have become a matter of course on social media, on the airwaves, in the air we breathe, the combativeness, the crudeness, the whipping up of animosity, the incitement to and expressions of violence. It is all so ugly. It is hard to see a way forward. That's how I feel, often. I think about the place we find ourselves today, our many griefs, and it feels so uncertain to me, and ominous, and overwhelming. I cannot see how we're going to get through it. I do not know what is next. I cannot recognize what will save us.

So it is with Easter. Today of all days tells us, the resurrection accounts remind us, replete as they are with rushed departures, misidentification, distress, and a mess of emotion, Easter morning announces, in no uncertain terms: we have not gotten ourselves ready. We are completely incapable of getting ourselves ready for it: for what God is doing in the resurrection. Like Mary, we do not come to the tomb prepped and primed and knowing what will happen next. Like Mary, we will not even recognize it. We will need to be called into it.

Jesus call Mary, there outside the tomb. Jesus recognizes her, even though her face has been disfigured by grief. Jesus knows grief, and Jesus knows the way through it. Jesus calls to Mary, calls her by name—just as Jesus calls each and every one of us by name. Jesus calls us, as he called Mary, through our grief. Mary sees then, who it is: her teacher, her Lord. How beautiful it is to see him. How beautiful he appears. How she longs to reach out to him, to hold him. But she cannot. Mary cannot touch him—not because he will smear dirt on her, but because he is ascending. The earth may still be clinging to him, but not for long, this world cannot contain him. What happened to him, all that is ugly in this world, cannot hold him down. It is weightless, compared to what he has accomplished. Death has its day, but it does not determine what will come, which begins, right now. What is happening is still unfolding—and we are invited into it. As Jesus says, “His father is our father, his God, our God.” His victory, our victory. His life, our life. Now, and always. This life, and the next. There is more to it. There is more beauty in this world, and the next, there is more beauty here and beyond, among us, and around us, and for us, for all creation, than we can know. Mary goes to tell the others, to share the message, to bring good news.

“How beautiful upon the mountaintop are the feet of the messenger who brings good news,” so says the first reading today. “How beautiful are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who announces salvation, who says ‘Your God reigns,’” “How beautiful, the feet.” If you think about it, this is also odd, that this ancient text says this. Feet are not famous for their beauty, and the Bible was written in a time before pedicures. The feet being described would be poorly shod, if at all, those feet that walked up mountains, and across wildernesses, and paused outside of tombs. Those feet would have been caked with dust and heavily callused, probably missing toenails. “How beautiful are the feet of those bring good news.” I cannot see your toes from here and you can keep your shoes on, but I can tell you, some of the most beautiful feet walk in and out of this place. I see here the most beautiful feet, on the most beautiful people, who share good news: who invite, and accept, and sing praises; who announce peace in the way they live, and the way they speak; whose love and care for others is a sign of the reign of God, the kingdom of God come, among us, here, now. You are beautiful, you people. You put on beautiful garments when you do this, in Christ's name, because of what Christ has done. You shake yourself from the dust, rise up and beautifully proclaim, Easter has come. Christ is risen. Alleluia and Amen.