Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Easter Vigil

March 31, 2018

Neal MacPherson

BELIEVING WITHOUT SEEING John 20:1–18

*Christ is risen!*

*He is risen indeed!*

*Alleluia!*

One of my favorite Easter stories is the race to the tomb recorded in the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John. Mary Magdalene, upon discovering that the stone at the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away, runs to tell Peter and the nameless Beloved Disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She tells them that the tomb is empty and that she does not know where the body of Jesus is. So Peter and the Beloved Disciple run towards the tomb. The Beloved Disciple must have been younger than Peter, or perhaps a bit stronger, for he outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. He looks in and sees the linen wrappings lying there, but he does not go in. Why? I like to think that he wants to reserve that privilege for Peter, who by the time the Gospel was written was head of the church in Jerusalem. Peter finally arrives, probably out of breath. He goes into the tomb, sees the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had covered Jesus’s head, rolled up in a place by itself. Then the Beloved Disciple follows Peter into the tomb. And the story says that the Beloved Disciple “saw and believed” even before understanding the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Peter sees but does not believe. Once again, in this Gospel, the faith of the Beloved Disciple is stronger than the faith of Peter. The Beloved Disciple does not see the resurrected Jesus and yet he believes. He believes without seeing.

Remember that in John’s Gospel, “believing” is another word for “faith.” And so we can say that “believing without seeing” is much the same as having faith without sight. Or, as the writer of Hebrews declares, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

The Beloved Disciple is our representative in the Gospel of John. He believes in the resurrection without seeing the resurrected Christ. I hope that holds true for us as well. We are invited to believe in the resurrection without seeing the resurrected Christ for ourselves. If we cannot see the Resurrected Christ, where, then, do we discover the good news of Easter? Where does our Easter faith lead us? I would like to suggest that our Easter faith leads us to discover those places in our own lives and in the life of the world where death has given way to life, where despair has been transformed into hope, and where sorrow has turned into joy. Perhaps it was a time when we experienced forgiveness after a time of deep hurt, or when we found the grace to forgive another who had hurt us deeply, or when we were able to integrate the death of a loved one into our life and experience, or when an addiction was overcome, or when a child of ours finally found their way in life. Or perhaps it was a time when we witnessed a tragedy like the Parkland School shooting turn into the determination of teenagers to do something about gun violence, or when homeless families found a home at a Kahauiki Village, or when people of good will came together to save a fragile wilderness area from development, or when Syrian volunteer rescuers, known as the “White Helmets” because of the color of the head gear they wear, never cease to search through the rubble looking for signs of life in the midst of death and destruction. There are so many signs of new life in our lives and in our world to be discovered. We just need a faith that will lead us to focus on these signs of life rather than allow the world’s ills to get the better of us.

We can be as the Beloved Disciple, who went into the tomb and believed in the resurrection without seeing the risen Christ. Let’s remember that faith is not sight. Faith is a trust that Christ has risen indeed even when we cannot see him, a trust that God never ceases to will new life for us and for our world even when we find ourselves in the midst of death and uncertainty. It is such faith that leads us to rejoice and declare:

*Christ is risen!*

*He is risen indeed!*

*Alleluia!*