EASTER SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Eggs and Shells, and an Empty Tomb”* John 20:1-18

I am so glad the children are back in church with us, and I am glad that their first day back is this very special day—Easter Sunday—and I sincerely hope this day becomes the most important holiday in the church year to them. I am going to be really bold and allow myself to hope that Easter will become even more important to them than *Christmas!*

Having said that, I must admit that I have, okay, close your ears children, that I have mixed feelings about Easter Egg Hunts. I am really glad we are having one for the children, and I hope we always will. At the same time, I have to say this: *Easter egg hunting is not what it used to be.*

Once upon a time, oh my gosh, I sound really old, don’t I, but once upon a time the eggs were real eggs. You boiled and dyed them and put pictures on them yourself, and you even ate them afterward. In fact, I would not be at all surprised to learn that once upon a time the boiled eggs were the main attraction.

These days, the eggs are made of plastic, and we fill them with candy, and sometimes coins. Again, I am not against this. In fact, I’ll be honest, I am always glad to be in close proximity to anything resembling candy, especially chocolate, and I am also hoping that after today’s Easter egg hunt one (perhaps more) of the children will offer me a piece of candy—a chocolate egg would be most welcome.

So, at about this time, some of you are wondering why I am spending so much time talking about Easter Eggs and Easter Egg hunts. That is a fair question.

It has to do with what I was sharing with the children during their time with us.

Eggs, butterflies, crosses, fish—there are so many objects that surround us that can and should remind us of Christ. There are so many more objects that are not common in our lives, but which are also representations that can remind us of Christ. Which is to say: they can and should remind us of Christ and new life because all of these things can be more than themselves.

All of these things that I have named—they are also signs. They are symbols, and symbols can be powerful entities in our lives—so long as we do not “water them down” or make them irrelevant, like making Easter eggs plastic symbols that signify little more than candy and loose change.

Symbols can be much more than that because they are more than graphics or pictorial. They are more than physical manifestations. They are *evocative*—which is to say: they can elicit memories, and thoughts, and feelings of recognition and understanding, of belonging, feelings of loyalty and commitment.

They do this by embodying systems of information and experience. This means that we receive a great deal of symbolic information in the realm *beyond* words, we often *feel* their impact and importance on an intuitive or instinctual level.

For example, for the past few weeks, I have been wearing this yarn lei. For the uninitiated, it is just a yarn lei. But for most of us in this Sanctuary, these are the colors of the flag of Ukraine. I did not have to explain that to you, nor did I have to explain why I asked the Sew Fun ladies to make the ribbons that were distributed last month in the Ukrainian flag colors. You all knew why: both of these things—the lei and the ribbons—they are symbols. They announce our desire that the people of Ukraine be left in peace. They show our opposition to the violence that is taking the lives of so many of their people and threatens their sovereignty as a nation. I hope they are also a symbol of our sympathy for the Russian soldiers, the young men and women who are loosing their lives, too.

A flag, or even the colors of a flag fashioned into a yarn lei—these are symbols that have meaning.

That is why it is important to learn about symbols, and the church is one of the places where we can come to learn about the symbols of our faith that surround us. What is especially important is that we do this deliberately so that we do not receive them mindlessly. Rather, I hope we learn the stories of Christ—like our children are doing—and then ascribe meaning to the various symbols that will come our way. I hope we receive the symbols of our faith with thoughtfulness and commitment.

Like eggs, and eggshells, and…the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is laden with symbols, and this is because John was writing in a community that was far removed from the events at tomb. Some seventy years had passed. By the time the Gospel of John was written Mary, Peter, and the other disciples had lived their lives. They had fulfilled their missions.

Despite Peter’s disappointing behavior after Jesus’ arrest, he went on to be a brave and tireless messenger of the good news. We do not know too much about Mary Magdalene because women’s stories were not often preserved. However, inasmuch as she was so dedicated that she was the one who came out so early on that first morning—a rather dangerous undertaking, I should add—I think we can assume that after meeting Christ again at the tomb, her love and dedication only increased and overflowed into a mission-filled life. I can imagine her going far and wide to tell the story of Christ and how he brought God’s message of hope and love; how he taught her and others his way of compassion, humility, and truth.

This was and is the good news that Mary and the others had to tell: that life can be a desolation, or a garden. This is what Jesus held out to us—a way of life—a way to live our lives holding on to the grace God gives us.

*Let me repeat that: the way of life, the way of hope, the way of love…the way of Christ is in receiving and holding on to the grace God offers us.*

This is what hope is made of. This is what life is made of, and we need to hold tight to it because the world and its ways are constantly trying to separate us from way of life God has given us.

In Palestine, some two thousand years ago worldly power and some individuals’ fear of losing their power and status tried to separate humankind from God’s grace by crucifying Jesus. They thought that if they killed him in this desperately ugly and painful way all others who dared to confront them would be too frightened to ever try it again—and it worked. For a lot of people, it worked very well.

For a time, it even worked on Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and all the other disciples—even Mary Magdalene. They were the people who had had front-row seats as Jesus taught them about life and instructed them in the good news of God’s love and grace.

Yet they, too, were separated—at least for a time—from everything they had learned because the crucifixion you see was also a symbol. It was a symbol of Imperial power. For a time, it was too great a symbol of power. It made everyone fearful. It even made the disciples fearful and doubtful. It made them forget.

For a time, they lost Christ’s message: that the only way any of us can hold on to God’s grace is by bestowing it on others. This requires doing the hard work of reconciliation. It requires believing that God’s Holy Spirit can and will work with us and in us as we make our way toward forgiveness and peace within ourselves, and with each other.

It especially requires leaning heavily on the Spirit as we constantly seek after the humanity of others, even the people by whom we feel the most threatened. This requires allowing God’s grace to prevail over rhetoric, over violence or coercion, over fear.

Holding on to God’s grace is also made difficult by the more seductive symbols of empire and the world in the trappings and glamour of wealth, and all of the other symbols of worldly power and domination. These are all of the things that Jesus was offered during his time in the wilderness—all of the things he rejected.

In the life of the disciples, for a while, all of these symbols of power succeeded. They frightened the best of the disciples…until God gave them one more symbol—the one that made all the difference in this morning’s gospel story. Indeed, it made all the difference in the world—to them and to us.

God gave them an empty tomb. As we heard a little while ago, Peter and the Beloved Disciples only had to see it to have their grief, their shock, their doubt, and their lives transformed. The empty tomb changed everything—and it still can.

Yes, the symbols of empire continue to frighten us and make us hesitant. However, the empty tomb confronts our fear and asks us to make a decision about which symbol we are going to give our lives to living and showing. Which are we going to learn and be so deeply grounded in that nothing can ever separate us from it again?

Jesus chose the good news that life is real and possible. He chose the love and grace of God. He chose to trust God. He centered his life in this, and nothing could separate him from it. This is what (finally) also captured Mary Magdalene, and Peter, and the Beloved Disciples, and the others…and, hopefully, us, too.

Once God’s ultimate symbol of power was revealed—the power of new life, the power of love, which was all embodied in the empty tomb—nothing could replace this in the hearts and lives of the first disciples. Nothing could replace it in their commitment.

But there are others, and we do well to remember them this morning, too. Let us remember people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose personal centering in God gave him the freedom and the courage to engage in a conspiracy against Hitler, even living with them in Nazi Germany.

Let us remember the late, great Desmond Tutu who could not have opposed apartheid without holding on to the image and promise of the empty tomb—which is God’s grace and goodness. And he did it with courage, infectious joy, and a reconciling spirit. There are many more, of course. You are probably naming them in your head right now. Let us give thanks for them all because they all knew the same thing.

They knew that symbols are important. Even more important is receiving them thoughtfully and committing ourselves to recognizing them and holding on to them. We need to hold on to them for dear life because that is what they are.

Let us:

Hold on to the symbols of Christ all around us—let our hearts and lives be lifted and made hopeful by them.

Hold on to the image of the empty tomb and the freedom and life it promises.

Hold on to the new life God continues to bring into the world through all of us—all who choose God’s grace, God’s hope, God’s love.

May this be even more than symbols to us. I pray Christ will be our lives.

Amen.