EASTER SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

April 9, 2023

*Our Resurrection, Too* John 20:1-18

(*with thanks to the Rev. William Sloane Coffin*)

On Easter Sunday, it is a joy to welcome the children as we did earlier. It is a joy to hope that this day at church will be especially wonderful for them—that it will be a time of laughing and running across the lawn to find all sorts of Easter treasures.

In earlier years, some of us might remember this, it was also a time for really dressing up in new Sunday clothes, Easter clothes. In many places ladies even wore Easter hats—or bonnets. These are all pleasant things. In fact, all of these activities help in making the day stand out in the imagination. It makes the day *un*common…but all of these things can also distract us from the real reason for the celebration.

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin—the pastor from whom I borrowed today’s sermon title—preached about the tendency to “domesticate” the message of the Bible in general, and the story of Christ in particular—even the Risen Christ, the One who endured the ordeal and suffering on the cross to return to us.

In an Easter sermon in the chapel at Yale University Slone Coffin once said these words:

*Too often, Easter comes across very sentimentally, like a dessert wafer–airy and sweet. But there’s nothing sentimental about Easter: Easter represents a demand as well as a promise, a demand not that we not only sympathize with the crucified Christ, but that we pledge our loyalty to the Risen One….I don’t see how you can proclaim allegiance to the risen Lord and then allow life once again to lull you to sleep, to smother you in convention, to choke you with success.*

What Rev. Sloane Coffin was talking about was the way in which our human tendency (aided and abetted by countless commercial campaigns aimed at selling us everything from chocolate bunnies to spiral-cut hams) is quick to dismiss what one writer has called “the hard edges” of life; those “edges of discipleship that require investments of time and effort, edges that were formed by God’s call for justice and righteousness, edges of discomfort that come when thinking about the world’s poor and suffering.”

To which we must also add: the edges that lead to global conflicts and war, or the edges of the continued devaluing of diversity, and especially the minority of voices in our communities, and the edges of the lust for power, and the edges of the fear of taking a close look at history from the vantage point of the powerless.

I wonder if the problem—at least for us as followers of Christ—is that we look upon the resurrection as something that happened only to Christ and the first disciples, and not an earthquake in the landscape of human history that is still reverberating? Because that is what it was and is, and what God meant it to be.

In every age and location where human thriving is threatened, there is a shifting of tectonic plates beneath our feet. Sometimes, it is no more than a subtle unsteadiness. However, it gains momentum when we pay attention and give ourselves over to it.

The moment the stone rolled and rumbled and came to rest on one side of the tomb; in the wrenching of earth and the weight of rock, Christ came forth, love returned to us, and because of this, the earth still trembles…as it must. It trembles in anticipation and a readiness that will, once again, unbalance the powerful and give voice to the needs of the hungry, the house-less, ones waiting for justice and righteousness to prevail in their neighborhoods, and in their lives.

This means that the resurrection of Christ was for more than Mary and Peter, and even the disciple whom Jesus loved. The resurrection is for us, too, and so the earth must tremble and shake as it did as the stone was rolled away so that it may move more of us out of our complacency whenever we are tempted to let Easter be no more than another holiday, no more than colored eggs and other children’s activities.

We can acknowledge that for Mary Magdalen, it was first a personal loss that grieved her so deeply that she bravely came to the tomb even though it was still dark. Everything she had revered and loved had been hung upon the cross.

But there was more: Mary had seen Christ suffer physically, but she had also seen him mocked and humiliated. The powers that be were not content to simply execute him, they had also sought to break the spirit of those who loved him, and it must be said that they almost succeeded.

We know this because the other disciples were nowhere to be found that morning. What is more: when told that the tomb was empty, they did not immediately believe. They had to go and see for themselves. And even after they had seen the empty tomb, John tells us they simply went home.

But Mary, who has been left behind, was still at a loss. She stood there weeping because she still believed that someone had taken away Christ’s body. She wanted to rescue it and put it back in the tomb, respectfully and with all honor.

In the world before the crucifixion, such a gesture would have been the right and good thing to do. In the world before the crucifixion, it would have been a private affair involving Mary, the other disciples, and Jesus’ family.

However, in the post-crucifixion world, in the Resurrection World, the stone has been rolled away, and as one person has put it this means that life is now:

*about toppling the powers and principalities* [of callousness and destruction]*; it’s about life conquering death,* *forgiveness stomping on hatred, generosity squelching greed, love overtaking success, the first being last, swords being smashed into plowshares, the hungry now pushing away from the table now full, the poor being lifted up while the rich stoop down to help with the lifting. Mary’s world will never be the same because, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, Jesus was on his way back to God and taking the whole world with him.*

That is: you and me. Christ Is Risen, and this means that we are also being raised out of the tomb. That is what Easter morning is supposed to remind us of: that we have been shaken awake. I suppose you could say, we are…“woke.”

If that is too much for you, then let it be this: the resurrection was more than a one-time event. Because it was about the return of perfect love—God’s perfect love for all of us—what resurrection settled, once and for all, is that love cannot and will not be defeated. God’s love prevailed and will never stop permeating the earth and reaching toward all who live on it.

God’s love was like an earthquake that completely remakes the whole of the land around us—in this case: the hearts and spirits of whole of the world. Our part in is to do what Mary did. We are to remain faithful and brave—even faithful enough to brave the darkness. It was in that darkness that Mary met the Risen Lord who dispelled her confusion and sorrow for good.

In sending her to let the other disciples know where he would meet them, Christ also made her his first missionary in the new life of the world. In an instant, Mary’s sorrow and hopelessness was replaced with joy and purpose. In an instant, Mary and the disciples were also resurrected with Christ—the ministry and mission they thought had been buried in the tomb with Jesus had been raised with Christ. All received what Mary received.

We are, of course, more than two-thousand years removed from that first Easter morning. However, we, too, are invited—indeed, we are implored—to also let God’s perfect love resurrect our lives, too. God is ready and willing to bring light and goodness back into the world—even the darkest of times in our world precisely because there is so much in this world of ours in need of it.

Where there is fear or confusion about the future, we are to be reminded of the Risen Christ who met Mary in a place of death and sent her out with his good news about new life. Just like her, we may not immediately recognize him for who he is. Which is to say, the resurrection God will accomplish in our lives may also be so new that we may mistake it for something else—just as Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener.

Luckily for her, and for us, the Resurrected Christ understands our moments of feeling unbalanced and off-kilter. Into our darkness, Christ brings into our hearts and eyes the light of God, which will guide us along new paths until we are sure and confident, and until we are glad and able to say, Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed. Halleluia!