

“What a Can Opener Taught Me about Easter”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Text: Luke 24:1-12

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.”

~ Luke 24:1

Prayer

God of life,

**Let Easter open our hearts and minds once again
to the mystery of the resurrection.**

In the name of Christ, the One who is risen, we pray. Amen.

A few years ago, in a world that existed prior to COVID, when more people showed up to worship on Easter morning than churches could accommodate in the pews, I stopped at a barbershop on the Wednesday of Holy Week to get a haircut. The barber wasted no time jumping into the inevitable haircut chatter. He asked me, ***“What do you do again?”*** I had been in his chair once before and he remembered me. ***“I’m the minister at the Congregational Church up the street,”*** I answered. He paused for a second and said, ***“So this Sunday is the ‘BIG ONE’ for you, huh? It’s like your Super Bowl Sunday.”*** I smiled and said quietly to myself, ***“Yes! Alleluia! Somebody else gets it! Someone else can see the daunting task of preaching about the big news of Easter!”*** I even gave the barber a bigger tip that day. Later, as I was driving home, still chuckling at the comparison of Easter Sunday with the Super Bowl, it dawned on me that on Easter Sunday I only have 15 to 20 minutes to get to the end zone without the aid of any entertaining commercials to keep everyone leisurely engaged and enjoying themselves. Thanks be to God that Easter still happens regardless of whether preachers can score a touchdown!

So let me thank all of you for being here this morning, on the holiest day in the Christian tradition, to participate in the most important celebration of our faith. Thank you for coming to this sacred space either in person or virtually to join the women who, on the first Easter morning, stumbled upon a mystery, a miracle, a story that is so big, so astonishing, so scandalous, and yet so modest and risible that the male disciples’ initial impulse was to dismiss the resurrection as hogwash, nothing more than ***“idle tale,”*** and the late physicist Stephen Hawking called this Easter proclamation ***“a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”***¹ So, thank you, friends, for gathering on this Day of the Resurrection not to try to make sense of Easter, but to bravely proclaim with the women who returned from the grave that the tomb is empty. Jesus is risen!

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

The resurrection is not a theological burden that we must bear and prove to be true to people who are uncomfortable with the language of mystery and miracles. Easter is a counter-proposal to all the evidence around us that suggests that mass shootings, guns, COVID, climate change, war, geopolitical rivalry, transphobia, racism, injustice, human suffering, disease and death itself are the most indisputable, powerful and all-determining truths about human life. The resurrection is definitely not a fairy tale that promises that we will live happily-ever-after if we believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. No! the Easter faith challenges us to imagine ourselves waking up every morning and rather than reaching for the usual spices that mask the odor of our woundedness, our fears, our traumas, our losses, our addictions, our failures, our prejudices and mortality, we choose to greet the unpredictable world, our own uncontrollable and unfinished life stories, and the convoluted reality of human history expecting a miracle, hoping for new life, trusting that resurrection is not meant to force us to believe in the unbelievable but to empower us to face forces much larger than ourselves with faith in God's power to help us see and name even modest signs of new life in us as we learn to live into and speak the deep truth of Easter. This is why we gather this morning to retell the story of the resurrection. As a New Testament scholar said so wisely, "***Perhaps in [our] telling of it, [we] may happen on the truth of it.***"²

Speaking this holy language of resurrection requires not just faith but practice. When the women were inside the tomb, still stunned by the emptiness of the grave, the two men in dazzling clothes invited them to remember what Jesus had spoken to the disciples. "***Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.***" Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had gotten up at daybreak to do one final act of love for Jesus: the man they had watched die on the cross on Good Friday. The spices they had prepared spoke the language of hopelessness and death. They had no doubt that Jesus was as dead as a doornail. The powers of the world and a religious system that depended on the *status quo* to preserve its position of privilege had conspired against Jesus because his subversive ideas about the Kingdom of God where the poor have enough and the rich are sent away empty-handed threatened the world order imposed by Caesar and enforced by his soldiers. Rome had won. The religious authorities in Jerusalem had silenced the young teacher who had ridden into the city on Palm Sunday as the promised peace-loving messiah. While the women were trudging toward the graveyard, they knew one thing for sure: after three days rigor mortis had set in. There was nothing else to do but to show their loving devotion to Jesus by anointing the body of their crucified teacher, rabbi and friend with spices that would counteract the stench of his decomposing corpse. Being asked to remember Jesus' words about new life in a place that stank of death may have sounded to the women an utterly preposterous suggestion and a heartless intrusion into their time of grief, still they searched their memories and their hearts, and the women remembered Jesus' words. Easter happened to them! There was no body to anoint. Their spices were no longer needed. The women

emerged from the tomb with hope that defies death. The terror of the cross was transformed into the joy of faith in the God of Easter who can do more than anyone can imagine. Violence, cruelty and death no longer dominated their language. The tomb could not hold back God's life-sustaining love revealed in Christ. The women ran back to the disciples, and they did their best to speak the new language of Easter. It was the women who preached the very first Easter sermon. They told the other grieving friends of Jesus what they heard at the cemetery, "**He has risen.**" But the male disciples, still unable to understand this big, expansive, life-transforming language of the resurrection, did not know how to fit the Easter proclamation into their constricted understanding of life where the fear of death haunts every person and the grave shatters all the dreams we share with our loved ones. The tomb-like realities of fear, oppression, anguish, despair, brutality, and death were still more real in the vocabulary of the male disciples than the surprising possibility of new life.

Last week, as I was mulling over the disciples' reaction to the very first Easter homily, I could not help but to think about my first summer in seminary. I was doing my best to adjust to a new culture while working very intentionally on improving my English. Every single day offered a whole new range of opportunities to learn words, idiomatic expressions, collocations and colloquialisms that never made it to my English classes in Brazil. And the best learning moments were the ones for which I had not prepared myself.

I still remember the trip I took to the grocery store to buy a can opener. As soon as I arrived at the store, I realized that I did not remember how to say "can opener" in English. It wasn't a word that had really mattered to my vocabulary until that day. I walked around the store determined to find what I had in mind without asking for help, but, after going up and down the aisles a few times without having much success and being the kind of person who is not very fond of grocery shopping anyway, I gave up. I approached a shelf stocker in one of the aisles and very politely asked, "**Would you be able to tell me where I can find one of those handheld contraptions used to open metal food cans?**" I am sure my question caught the man off guard. He put down whatever he had in his hands, stood up, let out a half-suppressed laugh and asked in an amused tone, "**You mean like a can opener?**" And, voila! There it was! The word I needed to know and that I won't forget – a can opener. It was as simple as that. But I would not have known the words for a can opener if I had not gone to the store and immersed myself fully in the language I wanted to learn, practice and speak as well as possible. Learning a new language takes time, dedication, discipline, patience and daily practice until it becomes second nature to you.

Every year, I spend the week prior to Easter Sunday asking myself how I am going to put the Easter message into plain, simple and yet intelligible, meaningful and compelling English. As the days go by and time moves inexorably from Palm Sunday to Good Friday and into the early hours of the Easter morning, preachers

become even more aware of the language barrier we face to translate the celebration of the resurrection into the same life-changing, mind-stretching and vocabulary-enriching experience that the first Easter was to the women who found the tomb empty. Ministers are always grateful for the gifts that musicians and choirs, the organ and trumpet, spring flowers and ladies in charming Easter bonnets, little children dressed in their cute Easter outfits and brave men sporting pink and lavender ties offer to making this Sunday of all Sundays a memorable Christian celebration. We need all the help we can get! But we also know that Easter is much bigger than the sentimentality and vacuity of bunnies and chocolate eggs and spring chicks.

Despite the challenge that the language of the resurrection creates, I have to confess that I am thankful that Easter does not fit easily into our general lexis. In our telling of the Easter story, it is important for us to remember that the mystery that brings us to church this morning cannot be neatly explained or rationalized. The Easter faith does not submit nicely to reasonable discourse. The outrageous message of the resurrection always surpasses our attempts to de-construct, parse, and fully understand the simplicity and audacity of the first Easter sermon, “**He is not here, he has risen.**” In fact, rather than allowing itself to become just another word in our vernacular, Easter presses us to learn a whole new way of imagining the world and talking about what is at the heart of our faith.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Peter eventually did run back to the cemetery to see with his own eyes what the women had breathlessly announced. But then, after seeing the empty tomb, Peter simply turned around and went back home, “**amazed at what had happened.**”

Peter returned home! Imagine if these were the only words left in the Easter story. Imagine if we had nothing more to do this morning, but to acknowledge the tragedy of Jesus’ death with a deep sense of loss and resignation. Imagine if all we had to say today was that Jesus did his very best to give humanity a brighter, larger, and better vision of human life but in the end the powers of this world had the final say.

Honestly, it would be much easier to preach about Easter if all we had this morning were a stone rolled to the side, an empty tomb, a few linen cloths lying on the ground and the missing body of a religious idealist. Perhaps, like Peter, we too could go home amazed, then take a deep breath of relief because we would not have to learn a new language of faith at all. Life would go on as always. We could hold on to the spices that hide the smell of evil, sin and death. We would not have to wrestle with the intellectual, spiritual, social and even political implications of the newness of the Easter message. The world would remain entirely in the hands of those who wage war and threaten to set off nuclear firestorms and use their economic power to intimidate enemies and flex muscles. If all we had was an empty tomb, then we would not have to imagine new possibilities for a world of gun

violence and climate change. We could just go on living and do our best to be nice people. If Jesus' life story had ended at the cross, then we would have no reason to ask ourselves how we participate and even take advantage of the very structures that dehumanize refugees and marginalize immigrants. If the only words that mattered to our vocabulary were the ones that draw lines, demand border fences, stoke fear, encourage resentment, justify inequalities and incite divisions, we might say that the language of Easter is nothing more than religious gibberish that will never offer an alternative mind and heart-set to humankind.

But the story does not end with Peter's anticlimactic decision to go home. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women keep reminding us that there is a power greater than the powers that planned and carried out Jesus' arrest, trial and execution! There is a new language of hope and love and human solidarity and goodness and peace and justice and faith and life that is stronger than hate, violence, war, injustice, indifference and death. There is an alternative story to the narrative of money and political power, Christian nationalism and racial discrimination, militarism and bombs that corrupts human life and destroys the earth. There is Easter, which the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin described beautifully as being much more than just a man's escape from the grave, but "***as a cosmic victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.***"³

This Easter language of powerless love that challenges the loveless power of human history does not come naturally to any one of us. We have to be intentional about internalizing, learning, and practicing the vocabulary of Easter. We have to immerse ourselves fully into this strange new language that keeps Jesus' most beautiful dream for humankind alive in the Church and in the world.

Friends, the stone has been rolled away! The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! and, hopefully, you and I are ready to practice this new language of faith. We do not need the spices to mask the smell of death anymore. We have a new language that is big enough to open our minds to the mystery of the resurrection. It is up to us now to immerse ourselves fully into this mystery so rather than going back home amazed, we go back to the world changed and transformed by the Easter story.

Jesus is risen! Never forget the story! Keep the language of resurrection alive! Make it your true nature! Feliz Páscoa! Happy Easter! Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

¹ By Mark Memmott in Stephen Hawking: Heaven Is 'A Fairy Story', The Two Way, NPR, 16 May 2011 [<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/05/16/136358335/stephen-hawking-heaven-is-a-fairy-story>].

² Edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode in The Literary Guide to the Bible, Luke by John Drury, p. 424.

³ William Sloane Coffin in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, VOL. I, p. 67.