

Sermon for Easter Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Ah, it feels good to say that. It's been a long time coming, about 40 days, give or take. So it is a good and joyful thing to be with you this morning to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus! It is a good and joyful thing, but that doesn't mean it's an easy thing. See, when Mary Magdalene comes running, when she comes back to tell us the grave is empty, and we go running to see for ourselves, yes we're taken to Christ's grave, but we're also taken to all those graves we've seen for ourselves.

About this time last year, I took an emergency trip down to my homeland. See, when I moved up here from Arkansas, I left pretty much all of my family behind. That brilliant uncle that built his own home and translated Shakespeare into Hillbilly. My six-foot tall aunt that claims to be 5'11" in heels and once had a pet raccoon that loved lemon meringue pie. My gardener of a mother who, when asked what she wanted for her birthday, said, "Either a KitchenAid mixer or a squirrel-hunting rifle." I left them all back in the hills of Arkansas. You know, they all went to the same college, Ouachita Baptist University, they all went to the same college on scholarships set aside for "the education of mountain people." And this always struck me as kinda odd, because they're all smart folks, cultured even. They weren't even first-generation college goers.

That was my grandmother, Mary. She studied at the Arkansas State Teachers College to be a school librarian. And she was a good one. The sort of paragon of a grandmotherly type, small and round, with big dimples and warm eyes and always a kind word to share with a struggling kid or a grandson with a skinned knee. She'd sing Johnny Cash to teach about flood plains along the Mississippi River. She'd churn butter to make Little House on the Prairie a little more real. And she'd dress up as all sorts of characters for Christmas and Thanksgiving and any other holiday that gave her the excuse to have a little more fun. And on Sundays, you better believe she was at the Valley Springs Baptist Church plenty early. She wasn't much of a singer, but she'd get there early to hear her son -- that same hillbilly Shakespeare quoter from earlier -- she'd get there to hear him sing in his rich baritone. She'd come with her baby blue dress and her knee-high stockings, her white hair short but graceful as its waves reached toward God, and always, when she walked in, folks treated her like a queen. Now, I don't mean that in the sort of twisted way that some Southerners expect to be treated. Not in a manipulative or condescending way. No, she walked in and was treated like a queen because if we could pick a queen for this world, we'd pick a sweet, kind, all-loving queen like Mary. When Mary walked into a room, it seemed like she was always trying to see where grace was hiding. Maybe it was in her son's voice, or in the warmth of the woman holding the door for her, or maybe it was in the kid distractedly fumbling with the wrapper of a Werther's Original she'd snuck him. When she saw the world, she saw Jesus.

When I left Arkansas, Grandma Mary wasn't the Grandma Mary I'd known before, except when she was. She was slowing down, her body mostly fine, but her mind slipping to Alzheimer's. She sort of time-traveled backwards, and each time I saw her, I was still a loved one, but each time, I was a loved one a generation earlier. So I was me, then I was her son, then I was her brother, then I was a childhood friend. Just a few months before I moved, I saw her again, sat in a church pew with her for a while, then kissed her forehead as I stood to leave. Turning to walk away, I heard her lean over to my mother and whisper, "Who was that handsome man?" That same day, even though her mind was failing, she'd stand and carry on conversation, or pretend to. She'd still try to make little kids laugh. She still had some mischief and some love and certainly faith, but she just couldn't be them fully anymore.

When I left Arkansas, I kinda knew that I wouldn't see her again. So, when I got the call to go back to those hills last year, I went. I didn't know if I would get there in time, but I knew I needed to go. I did, though. I

made it to her little, white farmhouse. It looked right. It smelled right. Inside, the floral couches and Thomas Kinkadee prints felt right. But grandma's bedroom was wrong. There was a hospice bed at the end of her four-poster. But the pictures surrounding her were right, and so were the people. She didn't look right, but her hands did. The same hands that had loved so many. The same hands that had searched for so much grace. The same hands that had worked so hard for God. Mom asked me to read a sermon I'd written about the rock shop down the road from Grandma's house, and my aunts and cousins and sisters and I wept in that room. I don't know if Mary heard that one, but if she did, she'll know that she taught me to look for grace when I walk in a room, too.

Now, I don't tell you this story to bring you down. I tell you this story to show you the hardest truth of Christianity: that we are a Resurrection People. Yes, we proclaim the Resurrection, but we can't get to the new life in resurrection without going through the grave first. And we go there often. Even Jesus went there. And I don't mean for himself, though we get that today, too. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, his friend, before raising him from the dead. That sorrow, that loss, that pain, it's woven into who we are. So we can't shy away from that place. Christianity at its core is no Hallmark card. It's hard. And it's sometimes painful. And it's often dark.

When Mary came to the tomb this morning, she came in darkness. She came not because she knew she'd see Jesus. She came because she loved him, and that's just what you do. You go to the graves of the ones you love. You tend them. Plant flowers or brush leaves away or put a flag in the ground. Mary didn't expect to see Jesus. She expected to weep her loss there, maybe find some small grace in that garden. Maybe even say her final goodbye before trying to leave Jesus behind.

Now, we know the rest of the story. The tomb is empty, she can't believe it, thinks the worst, and runs to tell the disciples. She still doesn't know what's going on. She's still crying. Her grief, her fear, her worry, she can't look for grace now, a whole pillar of salt's been heaped on her wounds. So she can't even see the grace standing before her. "She did not know the gardener was Jesus." She couldn't see that grace. And in all this, there he stands, quiet and calm and whole. And Alive. This is what it means to be a resurrection people. Crying out, running for help when we don't understand, and through our grief, getting surprised by grace. At the grave, we sing. From the ashes, we rebuild. Out of history, we restore. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

But as much noise as we Christians sometimes make, I'm amazed at how quiet the Resurrection itself actually is. Christ's death was big and loud, a political spectacle complete with earthquakes and eerie darkness. But the silence of the grave soon takes hold. And most everyone thinks the story's over. But Resurrection takes the time to move the stone. Resurrection takes the time to fold burial linens and set them neatly aside. Resurrection takes the time to sit a quiet vigil and wait. When Christ returns there's no booming announcement, no trumpets, no fanfare. There's only the quiet beauty of a garden. It's so quiet, and if Mary hadn't been there, the world may never have known. Alleluia. Christ is risen.

I wonder about my Mary. That grandmother of mine, she lived in a quiet part of the world, an underestimated hillbilly with a farmhouse and cattle on the end of a dirt road. She worshipped her God in a town with 200 people in it. And she found grace in small gardens, love in small places, and peace in small wonders. The resurrections she found, the only fanfare those resurrections ever received were gentle and quietly shared. And if Mary hadn't been there, the world may never have known. Alleluia. Christ is risen.

And I wonder about us. At graves or in gardens or even in the growing noises of our lives, what resurrections do we find? What resurrections would the world miss if we weren't there to tell them? We are a resurrection people, but all too often, we're looking for fanfare while resurrection quietly waits for us to notice.

And this is the quiet resurrection God taught Mary, and Mary taught me, and I'd like to teach you. Walk in a room and look around. If the gardner could be Jesus, then so could anyone. So, notice them. Love them. If you have to, fight for them. And if they'll let you, tell them what you know: that Christ is risen. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!