

Of Irises & Daffodils & Other Resurrection Appearances

Sermon on Mark 16:1-15
Easter Sunday April 16, 2006
Trinity United Ottawa
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As many of you are aware, I was bit by the gardening bug last year. I fear I've become as obsessive and tedious on this subject as a new parent who can't help extolling the wonders of every tiny perfect finger and toe of their baby miracle. I'm told there is something about women at 50 and their gardens, but the patch of earth in front of my home has become my place of meditation. Its seasons of dying and growing are a constant source of spiritual metaphor - reminders to me of the holy rhythms of birth, life, death and resurrection to new life and growth.

Since we had that glorious gift of a Friday when temperatures soared to 20 degrees, I have been taking every day delight in green tips emerging...but most especially in the appearance of the purple irises I planted last Fall - buried with hope, and alive again this Spring. Those irises have a resurrection story to tell.

Anne Squire dug them out of her garden for me. A year ago, when we toured her yard, I told her I'd love to have some of those purple irises. When she called me that it was time to come get them in the Fall, she told me their story. Anne, as some of you know, is a former moderator of the United Church. She is also a cancer survivor...three times! The third time round, she was really not expected to survive. That Fall, she said to a friend: "But I have to see next Spring. I just planted a new bed of purple irises!" That winter, which everyone thought was her last, her many friends and admirers gathered to celebrate her life with her. They made a ritual for her, in which each one spoke to her of what she meant to them, and then placed on a worship centre in the room one purple iris. That was quite a spiritual bouquet!

And of course, Anne lived to see her irises rise that Spring, and for many springs

since. I feel so graced that another generation of Anne Squire's resurrection irises is rising in my garden. They say to me: there is always hope! Even with 'terminal' cancer.

And we need that resurrection hope at Trinity right now. Because our Good Friday this year, it seems to me, is cancer. Five among us, at least, are travelling the stations of the Cross of cancer: diagnosis, shock, denial, rage, test results, surgery, chemo, hair loss, nausea, weight loss, grief, loss, loss, loss... So on this Easter morning, surely all of us who are effected by this scourge crave to celebrate and arise with new hope. We need to find and feel the hope that our most central Christian story promises. We need to recognize and be lifted by this rising day, when Christ's story promises us that every kind of dying will be followed by the grace of some impossible, wonderful new life.

I am here to proclaim today, that the promise of resurrection is real. Just in these past few weeks, in the Good Friday struggling stories of several of you at Trinity, I have heard your evidence of many kinds of 'resurrection appearances'. It seems that especially when our lives and our hearts are broken open by pain and suffering - as the hearts of Magdalene and Mary and Salome were that morning at Jesus' grave - any of us can become sensitized with a new awareness of resurrection happenings. Suddenly we become able to see and hear the presence of the Holy in our lives, the evidence of what we Christians call the living Christ. In the midst of impossible pain, we find ourselves visited by hope and moved to rejoice: Christ is risen indeed!

Resurrection visitations, like all mystical experiences, come in uniquely personal moments, but often with discernable patterns. When I recognized the gift of this Easter sermon coming, I asked each person if I might share their story. All of them graciously agreed, but I'll not name them, as spiritual experiences are intimacies shared. Inside of one week, I heard these two personal stories from Trinity widows. From a woman in her 90s: "One night when I was so lost after my husband died, I woke up and sat up in bed because *he was there!* standing at the foot of my bed.

He was there. After a while he said: "I have to go now, but I'll see you again." I asked her how she felt after that and she exclaimed "Wonderful!"

Another woman, widowed about a decade ago, trusted me - and you - with this story she hasn't even told her children...because she fears they will think mom has lost it! She was in the depths of that first year of grieving the death her lifelong partner. "I woke up from this dream where he was with me. He said, 'Don't worry Janie, I'm O.K.' And after that I was OK. I got on with my life. I've enjoyed my life ever since!"

I have been told by women of my generation, twice in this past month, about the time when their father came to them. One recalled it like this: "I was in the recliner chair in the living room, where I often slept during that last awful year of my marriage. I was wondering how I could get through another Christmas. And then my dad was with me. I heard him say. 'You can do it, Annie!' the way he used to. And then I knew I could."

Hearing that story, another person responded. "My dad came to me too, in the night. It was a feeling of just total love. I think it's having an open heart that allows you to experience that. When your heart's broken, that love gets in."

God is love, right? Resurrection appearances always seem to be suffused with that feeling of shivery, awesome love that is - wonderful!

One woman who grew up at Trinity told me of a resurrection moment that happened to her right here. One evening on her way back from the bathroom to her CGIT meeting, something drew her into the empty Sanctuary. And there was Jesus, just below the cross. She felt he was praying at the cross...his long hair and back to her. She told me this vision lasted for a long time...several minutes...and that "I have always believed in God."

There is a 'critical thinker' part of my brain, and perhaps yours too, that demands explanations for these events - even though I've had them myself. Lots of us can't

help but join with the disciples who didn't believe Mary and Magdalen and Salome. We have some serious questioning and thinking to do. We'd often prefer to keep the resurrection in the realm of pure metaphor, where it is useful and hopeful, but less likely to disturb our world view.

When I try to explain these resurrection appearances, which are a reality I know, I can only posit that our religion is right in naming God as love. And in recognizing that love is a force that is not bound by our rudimentary concepts of linear time and physical space. That love does indeed manifest realities that only our quantum theories can begin to posit. And since our deepest source of love is often a parent or a spouse, is it surprising that these resurrection presences after a loved one dies are so common? And is it really so unbelievable that Jesus, the man among all humankind who we know to have lived love most fully, is seen again and again through the ages? Why are we surprised that death could not contain him, when he was so connected to the God who is love?

Alas, not everyone who needs one of these resurrection appearances has one. But we have amongst us, enough of them to share. Enough knowledge of life greater than death to spread hope. To uplift one another with our collective faith. We have between us all the evidence we need, that the love of God our Creator for each and every one of us, is a great enough power, even in the face of death and cancer, to promise us possibilities for new life.

In my garden, right beside those purple irises, a circle of daffodils is sprouting yellow tips, promising to bloom. Daffodils are the symbol for cancer month right? The indomitable little yellow blooms express our hope that cancer can be beaten. Those blooms are coming in bunches, even though they were drenched with snow last week.

The daffodils in my garden keep reminding me to sing the words of that great Christian mystic Julian or Norwich. She wrote:

“Love like a yellow daffodil, is coming through the snow.

Love like a yellow daffodil is, Lord of all I know.
Ring the bells of Norwich and let the winter come and go.
All shall be well again, I know.

All shall be well, I'm telling you.
Let the winter come and go.
All shall be well again, I know.”

Christ is risen indeed!
Happy Easter!

Please join in singing: “In The Bulb There Is A Flower” VU # 703