**A Perplexing Faith**

Isaiah 65:17-25
John 20:1-18

Easter is our halleluiah Sunday. It is a Sunday we proclaim loudly and confidently the Good News that the Christ executed by the powers of injustice, has arisen through the power of love and remains present with us today. Hallelujah. Yet, none of the Gospels approach the story of resurrection with confident halleluiahs. Each of them, in their own way tells a story about confusion, about people who are perplexed. Even John, the Gospel writer who presents Jesus with confidence and self assurance on the cross, is unable to tell us about the resurrection without making space for confusion, and people who are as perplexed as we often are with our own lives and world.

In our Gospel reading today we are told about the women who have come to the tomb in order that they may tend to the body of Jesus, following Jesus execution by Rome. Their world has already been turned upside down. Nothing has worked out as they have expected and hoped. What they encounter at the tomb provides little relief. Finding the tomb open rather than closed as they expect, they go inside and find the tomb empty. Luke tells us “they are perplexed…” They are confused. The empty tomb places them in an unfamiliar landscape.

 It was about 6 weeks ago that our daughter Erica arrived in Seoul,

South Korea. She will be spending a year teaching English to young Korean children. She arrived a week before school was to begin so that she would have some time to get settled and as best she could get her bearings. Not long after she arrived, we received our first couple text messages. Erica wrote, “It’s very confusing. Getting around is hard. Everything looks the same….The most overwhelming is everything is in Korean.”

 Her initial days in Seoul reminded me of my trip to Europe after graduating from college. I was traveling on my own, but had a contact in Rome, so I thought I would start there. I took a bus from the airport to the center of the city, near the Vatican, and then began asking directions for the address I had been given. After awhile it started feeling like I was walking in circles, which as it turned out I was. I was later told that Italians, out of politeness, often want to provide an answer and so they point you in a direction even though they may have no idea where they are sending you. I spent the night curled up in a corner next to some steps. Like my daughter, I was in an unfamiliar landscape and found it all very confusing, indeed totally perplexing.
There is, of course, no need to engage in foreign travel or travel of any type to find ourselves in a foreign, unfamiliar, utterly perplexing landscape. Just this past week, I was schedule to share a meal at a nice restaurant with a group of people with whom I have been working on a particular project for the Twin City Area Presbytery. We have had numerous meetings, lots of hard work, and we felt that we deserved a night of fellowship and relaxation. Unfortunately, before our get together we discovered the outcome we had hoped for and indeed anticipated was not to be. Instead of meeting at a nice restaurant, we were back at our office meeting space. All of my colleagues reported sleepless nights as we moved into this unfamiliar landscape, perplexed about what has unfolded and what we should do next. How often has life failed to unfold as we expect and we find ourselves perplexed and confused, wondering where do we go from here?

 Last week, I along with others received word about a colleague who has been diagnosed with cancer. No one saw it coming. He and his wife were in fact planning a trip abroad. Instead of the unfamiliar landscape that often comes with international travel, they find themselves in the unfamiliar and perplexing landscape of cancer. How often do we or ones we love find ourselves confronting situations that we would never have planned or chosen, realizing we are in an unfamiliar and perplexing place?

 If there is one common denominator I hear when folks talk about this year’s political campaign it is a feeling of being perplexed and confused by what is happening. Yes, political analysts do what they are paid to do and offer their tentative answers about why certain politicians seem to be so popular. But, when those analysts are most forthright and honest, they end up confessing that they are as confused as the next person and can only guess as to how this year will all unfold. We find ourselves in a landscape that is utterly perplexing. How often do we open the morning paper or turn on the news and find ourselves in land of confusion? Many of us would like to think that we have made real progress with addressing racism, but Black Lives matter reminds us we have a long long way to go and white Americans are perplexed. Young people who appear to have opportunity for a better life are drawn to groups that sponsor terror and we are perplexed.

 No one can blame the women who come to the burial tomb of Jesus for grasping at whatever answers might be available in their present state of confusion. It’s what we do. We look for answers. We look for some explanation, a way to make sense out of the confusion, the uncertainty, the perplexity.

 Unfortunately, the only answer the women have is that Jesus is dead. The only answer they have is that once again the powers of domination have proven victorious over one who they believed was offering them a new way to live, a new possibility for themselves and their world.

Jesus lived a life of radical inclusion. A refugee, an immigrant from birth, his heart was open wide to all who were on the margins of society, particularly the poor and those who others would turn away and reject. This Jesus has been executed by the powers of exclusion. Jesus lived a life of compassion. When people were hungry, he insists there is enough for all and they are fed. When they are in need of healing, Jesus not only heals but teaches his disciples how to be healers. This Jesus is executed by those who see compassion and healing as a weakness, turning away from those in need. Jesus lived a life of forgiveness, always seeing the potential and humanity in every person. This Jesus is executed by those who hate. Jesus lived a life open to the spirit of God in all creation, including the birds of the air and plants as small as a mustard seed. This Jesus is executed by the powers of exploitation. Jesus lived a life of peace, never afraid to challenge those with authority, but doing so as one who knew the peace of being at one with God. This Jesus is executed by the powers of violence.

 The women come to the tomb pushing back their confusion, uncertainty and perplexity with the only answer they believe is available to them. Jesus is dead. Their dream is dead. Their hope is dead. We often draw the same conclusion. We sing hallelujah, but in our heart of hearts we come to the tomb of our disappointments, the tomb of our losses, the tomb of unwelcome news, the tomb of exclusion, the tomb of oppression and injustice, the tomb of the worlds violence and hatred, the tomb of an uncertain future and what we expect to encounter is death.

 Death as the answer is, of course, exactly what Rome wants the women to believe. If death is the answer, then exclusion triumphs. If death is the answer, then illness is the victor. If death is the answer then injustice prevails. If death is the answer, then hatred rules. If death is the answer, violence is our only option. If death is the answer than anytime we face disappointment or loss, all that remains is the end of our dreams, nothing more. The executors of Jesus know it is in their best interest if we all agree death is the answer.

 Fortunately, these courageous women of the resurrection refuse to stay at home alone in their grief. They face their loss together and in their grief they discover an empty tomb. This, of course, is precisely what Rome and the powers of Rome hope to avoid. They are fearful of an empty tomb. They had posted guards to ensure the dead body of Jesus would stay where it is. The last thing Rome wants, the last thing hopelessness, discouragement or despair wants is for any of us to face our emptiness.

 These courageous resurrection women are facing the emptiness of the tomb, the very emptiness they feel inside. And as they face their emptiness they begin to question the certainty of death, the certainty that all is lost, the certainty that violence, injustice, exploitation and hatred are the victors. Luke tells us, they are perplexed.

Earlier, Jesus told the disciples, including these women, if only you have faith the size of a mustard seed you will be able to move mountains. Faith for these women on this Easter morning begins with being perplexed; no longer accepting the status quo as if life can never be any different than it now is. They are perplexed. Faith is germinating in their lives. Death with its confident assurance and all its unequivocal answers is losing its grip on these women.

They are perplexed. They are filled with questions. Doubt about death’s victory is rising up within them and they again remember the power of the promise that was and is made flesh in Jesus. It is the promise of God spoken years earlier by the prophet Isaiah, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth…Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating…No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime….they shall build houses and inhabit, they shall plant vineyards and eat them..the wolf and the lamb shall feed together”. The women are perplexed. The seed of faith is taking hold. They are remembering the power of love they knew in Jesus, the power of love spoken of by the prophets, the power of love that is greater than all the certainties of death.

You would have every reason to expect that after 35 years of preaching Easter sermons I would have some answers. But, I have to tell you, I am as perplexed about life, about suffering, about disappointment, about injustice, about personal loss, about our current political landscape as all of you. And, I am perplexed by the promise of resurrection, which seldom seems to make nearly as much sense as the concrete, explainable, self-justifying answers of death.

And yet, I am drawn to this unexplainable, answer defying promise that the love revealed in Jesus is stronger than death in all its many manifestations. I am drawn to this perplexing faith grounded in the resurrection assurance love is never defeated, love unites us all, God’s love is a force at work in our world and lives that makes all things new. We have a perplexing faith and it is our certain hope. Alleluia.

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah brings a word of life, promise and hope to people who have given up on themselves and their future. They have returned from exile in Babylon, but the memory of Jerusalem as it once was and the challenge of rebuilding is overwhelming. They see no possibility for a future with hope, but Isaiah assures them God is the God of hope and new life.*

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord — and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

**Luke 24:1-12***In our Gospel lesson, today women who are followers of Jesus confront the reality that Jesus is now dead. They come to prepare his body with spices as is their custom. But, instead they find the tomb is empty and they are perplexed. As the story unfolds the confusion among the disciples only grows. But, the seeds of resurrection faith have been planted and already beginning to take hold.*

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 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." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.