

“Being Humble Enough to Know Where You Rank in Life”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

Scripture Readings: John 20:1-18 and Acts 10:34-43

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It was a story for the ages. Captivating, amazing, beyond belief (really) except for the fact there were many who witness to the events as they eventually were revealed, and who can swear to the veracity of what had taken place.

Today we would say this was a story that captivated the world and deserved to be on CNN because it was real news, and not it became news simply by appearing on CNN.

I assume you have heard the story, or have echoes of it in your memory when the details are shared with you. It is a story, as I have said, for the ages, and never wanes in fascination and amazement for those who hear it years after it took place.

A woman in her 90’s gives a bequest to the University of Southern Mississippi. In total it was \$150,000. The amount of the gift was not record-setting, but it surpassed most such gifts ever received. It represented 60% of her estate – 10% went to her Baptist church and another 30% (10% each) went to her three surviving relatives.

She earned such wealth because she had worked since dropping out of school in grade six. Her aunt was ill, in hospital, and she had no children, so there was no one to care for her. This young woman did what was expected – she looked after her aunt. When her aunt got better, this girl turned to the trade that she knew she could do, and like her grandmother before her, she became a washerwoman.

She did that, caring for the needs of those in her neighbourhood and beyond for over 75 years.

Now you, like me, may still wonder how does a washerwoman earn enough to have an estate of a quarter of a million dollars? Well, this woman was taught to think about others from a young age. That was why she left school to care for her aunt. She also was taught to save by her mother, so she opened her first savings account in grade six.

She never bought a house – an uncle gave her his house when she was an adult, so she had a place to live. She never bought a car – she walked to work or took a bus. People drove her to worship every Sunday at Friendship Baptist Church , and she would walk over a mile pushing a cart to get groceries.

It was her hard work and regular walking that allowed her to do her job well into her late 80's, and live until her 90's.

Later in life, once her planned gift was known, she received an honorary degree from the University of Southern Mississippi – the first person so honoured. She received numerous educational awards and national accolades, even being recognized by President Clinton.

Do we really need to know her name? The story hardly improves by acknowledging who this woman is, yet we deny the essence of the person and her gift to the world if we do not identify her – this is a summary of the story of Oseola McCarty, a child of God.

I have a friend who is a retired diaconal minister who reminds me (and anyone who will listen) when a tragedy happens, and a young man or woman is arrested in relationship to that tragedy, that “these perpetrators have a mother somewhere who is hurting and in need of our understanding and prayers.”

Oseola had a mother who encouraged her in life, reminded her of looking out for others, caring for those who needed support, and many black students have attended the University of Southern Mississippi in the last 16 years thanks to her generous gift for those who had the ability, but not the funds, to attend school.

Today is Easter Morning. We think of new life and renewed hope, yet we are in the shadow of a time where Jesus faced death and rejection. But remember Jesus had a mother, too – a mother who was with him through his ministry, and who stood by him as he died on a cross. She taught him many lessons of life, no doubt, and deserved our prayers and understanding as she gave her life, more than once, for the life of this chosen one.

Easter morning has an importance in the Christian faith that goes beyond any other event. Yet it seems beyond belief at times – someone dead comes back to new life. Is it possible?

We have had a lot of experiences of resurrection-like events in recent years. The earthquake in Nepal last year found many people trapped in rubble for hours, even days. A 4 month old baby was rescued after 22 hours, a mother was saved after almost two days buried, and two teenagers were rescued after 5 days under rubble. In Haiti in 2010, a man was taken from the rubble of that earthquake 27 days after the quake hit the capital of Port au Prince.

Saved due to personal determination, strategic falling of rubble, and dedicated rescue crews. New stories of life given, resurrection experienced.

But the story of Easter has one aspect that I have often misunderstood. When Jesus is first seen by Mary Magdelene, she is confused, and assumes Jesus to be the gardener.

“What an insult,” I have always assumed. “What a way to sell Jesus short!”

Yet the very opposite is the case. A gardener is seen as a prime role model in the biblical tradition. After all, Adam and Eve were entrusted with a garden in the beginning of creation. They may have squandered that gift, but it does not negate the value and importance of being an effective gardener.

George Washington Carver once remarked that the woods “speak with the voice of God.” Christian Bovee claims that: “To cultivate a garden is to walk with God.” Another writer, Alan Havhames, declares: “I’ve always regarded nature as the clothing of God.”

Easter is not so much an affirmation of the seemingly impossible, but a celebration of the ways that God is alive and with us in every moment of life. Whether we face joy or sorrow, accomplishment or disappointment, growth or death, despair or hope, God is there with us.

No matter how majestic or simple our lives may be, we can experience the wonders of God, for the wonders of God are as simple as the commitment of a washerwoman, the attention of a gardener, or even the journey of a carpentry intern who became a preacher, teacher, and healer in his own day.

Finding your gift, and sharing it, is the great miracle of life, and it can bring new life to you and to others. We simply need to be modest and humble enough to know who we are, and what we have to offer.

Is resurrection possible, and can new life emerge from the present? I will let you decide that for yourself, but may I suggest we cannot live life fully without seeing, and being moved by, new life each and every day. So is the promise, and the hope, of Easter.