

“How Will We Open the Door to Life?”

People of God, let us pray. God who is Love, we welcome your life-renewing presence among us as we wonder together on this Easter morning: how will we open the Door to life? We long for increased awareness of your transformative, resurrection love moving in our lives. As your Holy Spirit stirs our hearts and our minds this morning, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends in Christ, let's wonder together this morning: what signs indicate to us that we are alive? A heartbeat indicates that the heart is pumping vital lifeblood throughout the body. Respiration indicates that the body is engaging in the next moment of consciousness. Sensations of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch add layers of experience to our heartbeat and respiration.

Christians have traditionally thought about resurrection as a literal return to physical life after physical death. A return to heartbeat, respiration and sensation after they had all ceased. Let's invite ourselves on this Easter morning to also consider how we might experience resurrection without physical death. What if we don't limit resurrection to being about a return from physical death to life but also understand it to be a return to awareness of our aliveness – resurrection as a way of renewal that leads to greater vitality?

On our sermon response page for today, I pose these questions for your consideration (and it would be a privilege to hold with you any insights you might choose to share with me):

“This is the Door to Life; those who know Love shall enter through it” (Psalm 118). What factors or circumstances of your life hold you back from opening the door (rolling away the stone) to emerge into new and healthier life?

What might resurrection (new life) look like for you? Who will support you as you emerge into new, healthier life?

A wise friend once said to me, “Clare, you preach to yourself, don’t you?” It’s true! I tend to ask questions that I grapple with myself, trusting that they will also have some thread of relevance in your lives.

Before we join Mary in the garden, let’s open ourselves to the spirit of Psalm 118. As Rolf shared when reading the Psalm moments ago, in *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, author Nan Merrill attempted not a direct translation of the Psalms but a companion book. I love the posture of affirmation with which she approaches the Psalms – “*An Invitation to Wholeness.*” If you have been looking for a way to deepen your faith journey by finding a spiritual practice that nourishes you, I highly recommend this book as a kind companion.

Several verses from the Psalm nourished me this Holy Week as I wondered how we each might open the door to life – that is, how we each might experience resurrection in these days that we are living. We heard:

*“You, O Loving Presence, have been my strength,
You have stood beside me in the darkness.
You have walked with me into the light.”* (Ps. 118:16)

*“You, O Loving Presence, have been my strength,
You have stood beside me in the darkness.
You have walked with me into the light.”*

I wonder this Easter morning: **where and with whom do you experience the strengthening Loving Presence that is God – what specific people and places remind you that Loving Presence is beside you both in the darkness and when you’re emerging into light?** Surround yourself with those people and places who strengthen you!

Our companion to the Psalms continued:

“Yes, You opened to me the gates of truth and justice that I might enter through them.” (Ps. 118:19)

“Yes, You opened to me the gates of truth and justice that I might enter through them.”

Are you familiar with the following question (having heard it directed either to you or to another)? Do you know Jesus as your personal friend and savior? Thanks to author Nan Merrill, this Holy Week and Easter may be the first time I have ever found a way to appreciate that question as life-giving and affirming. Throughout my first forty years, variations on the question “Do you know Jesus as your personal friend and savior?” always prompted me raise my defenses, leery of what limited human theological ideas were weighing the question down.

Not this Easter! Today, I hear the words of the Psalm as referring to the way Jesus embodied Loving Presence in his living and in his dying and how he continues to beckon me toward the way of truth and justice. I wonder: **what might it feel like for you to talk with Jesus, thanking him for the example he set for you? Might it energize and strengthen you to say unabashedly: “Yes, You opened to me the gates of truth and justice that I might enter through them.”**

One more verse stood out to me from the Psalm and led me to our focus question for today – How will we open the Door to Life? We heard Rolf read, *“This is the Door to Life; those who know Love shall enter through it.” (Ps. 118:20).* *“This is the Door to Life; those who know Love shall enter through it.”*

There is a running joke in pockets of the worldwide Christian community that states that, within the context of a children’s Sunday school lesson, the answer to any question is almost always “Jesus!” I might argue that the answer in any space of Christians journeying together is hopefully almost always, “Love!” And Jesus embodied the love of God so beautifully.

When the verse echoes in my heart (*“This is the Door to Life; those who know Love shall enter through it.”*), I feel that both Love and Jesus are the Door to Life.

I wonder: **Will you, this Easter and in coming days, trust God’s Loving Presence (as embodied by Jesus) to work in and through you and your neighbors – further opening the Door to Life?**

Let’s turn now to the powerful moment in this morning’s gospel story when Mary was fully present with her grief. Mary of Magdala has always struck me as a friend and disciple of Jesus who was a true kindred spirit with him. It seems they shared fully with one another in the gritty moments of life – including times of feeling fullness of gratitude, care, and grief. Hear again this moment in the story of Mary of Magdala:

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’

She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).”

Mary opened the Door to Life by staying present with her grief and available to the touch of Love. By staying present with her grief and available to the touch of Love, she was ready to receive the gift of being seen and known by name.

Jesus' torture and execution caused a shocking change in Mary's life in which Jesus had been such a present companion. My friend and colleague down the road, Pastor Daniel Harrell (Interim Legacy Minister at St. Peter's United Church of Christ) has said this about change and grief: *"Change is about loss. Loss is about grief. Grief is about love."* *"Change is about loss. Loss is about grief. Grief is about love."* Wise, wise words!

Everything does always come back to love. And our lives are filled with changes that evoke feelings of loss. If we welcome ourselves to stay present in grief and welcome the companionship of those who love us best, we will remember our belovedness. *"Change is about loss. Loss is about grief. Grief is about love."*

Friends, with the Psalmist and with Mary of Magdala, may we:

- Surround ourselves with those people and places that remind us of the Loving Presence that is beside us both in the darkness and when we are emerging into light.

With the Psalmist and with Mary of Magdala, may we:

- Talk with Jesus (our friend and teacher), thanking him for the example he has set for us, saying unabashedly: *"Yes, You opened to me the gates of truth and justice that I might enter through them."*

And, finally, with the Psalmist and with Mary of Magdala, may we:

- Trust God's Loving Presence (as embodied by Jesus) to work in and through us and our neighbors – further opening the Door to Life.

We can embody Loving Presence. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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April 9, 2023 (Easter Morning)
Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; John 20: 1-18