

A Daring Adventure

John 20:1-18

Jennie Ott © First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC © 12 April 2009

Easter

I once bought a greeting card with a quote on it that read, "Life is a daring adventure, or nothing."¹

I liked the quote, but more than that, I loved the picture above it. It was a photo of an old gray-haired woman, wearing pilot's goggles and a scarf, sitting at the helm of a soapbox derby car as it launched off a ramp into the wide open air.

That was it. The photo just caught her there, in mid air, scarf flying in the wind. No landing ramp. No net. Just a cornfield in the background and a smile plastered on her face.

"Life is a daring adventure, or nothing."

I bought the card that day. I bought it for my grandmother, who was in the throes of chemotherapy at the time and whose 87-year old body was tired of fighting lung cancer. She was dying. She had been dying for some time. And I couldn't bring myself to mention the "d" word in front of her. I didn't know if she was scared, or worried, or frustrated, or sad about death, and I was afraid to ask, in case she was feeling any of those things.

So when I saw that card, I had to buy it. That woman in the photo was my grandmother. My grandma had approached all of her life as an adventure, and my hope was that maybe now she would think of death as an adventure, too. I even wrote that in the card. Her life was the ramp that was launching her into the great unknown, and I wanted her to go with a smile on her face.

The Easter story is my grandmother's story. It is the story of that wild woman in the soapbox derby car. And I think it is our story.

The resurrection takes us from what we have known into the great unknown. It takes us from paths that lead to tombs and death, and places us on paths that lead to new understandings and new life. Most of all, the resurrection calls us into adventure, each and every day of our lives.

Just ask Mary Magdelene.

There's something about Mary. There's something her raw honesty, as she kneels in her grief in front of that tomb. Something about the way her shoulders hunch as she weeps, that speaks to us about the utter disappointments we all face in life.

For her, on this day, she realizes her teacher is not only truly dead, but that the one act she thought she could do – that of anointing his body – cannot be done. Not to mention that all that talk she heard of Jesus being the good shepherd and tending to his flock, all that talk of him being the light of the world and ushering in a new kingdom, all of it is meaningless in the face of her emptiness.

¹ This quote is attributed to Helen Keller.

For Mary, on that morning, life was nothing. So she knelt at the tomb—the tomb of Jesus, the tomb of her own loss and disappointment.

There she sat, and there we sit, too.

Like Mary, I imagine we have our own tombs that we visit everyday. For some of us our tombs are buried right in our own hearts, those nooks and crannies where we store the deep dis-eases and losses of our lives—our broken relationships, our grief over dead parents, or grandparents, or children, the losses of our own innocence. And sometimes we can't help but sit and weep over the disappointments we carry in our hearts.

For some, our tombs may be our bodies themselves, bodies that give in to arthritis and AIDS, bodies that wrestle with anxiety and depression, bodies that don't look like we want them to or move like we want them to, bodies that, for many of us, are in fact dying. And sometimes can't help but sit and weep over these bodily tombs that let us down.

Finally, for some of us, our tombs are outside of us, and we visit them each day when we read the newspaper or listen to "Morning Edition." We hear of two wars that continue to claim the lives of young American men and women and countless families and children abroad. We read of rising temperatures and falling stocks. Genocide. Earthquakes. Floods. Pirates. The list goes on. We read and we listen, and we feel the weight on our hearts, and sometimes we can't help but weep at the deep injustices in the world.

Is it all meaningless? Is life nothing?

But then.

Just then.

Just in the midst of our weeping...Just in the midst of Mary's weeping...she feels a prickle on the back of her neck. Someone is there. Someone is behind her. Someone who knows her name.

"Mary."

Maybe it was the lilt of his voice. Or its inflection. Or the way his breath sounded as he sounded out her name. All we know is that right then, she knew. And in her knowing, she became new.

In that earthy, human moment, barefoot in the garden, life went from being nothing, to being something again. He saw her, tears and all, grief and all, and he called her by name. Life would not be the same.

It was as if, in that garden, Jesus handed her goggles and a scarf and told her to get ready for the soapbox derby because life was about to get adventurous again.

And her adventure started right then. Jesus tells her to leave the tomb, to go out and tell the other disciples—tell her brothers and sisters—that he is alive, and that all of them belong to God. Here was the risen Christ, raising up the new body of Christ. And on that morning, hope was in the air.

Mary, who had arrived on the path that led to death, turned on her heels and headed out on the path that led to new life. Goggles on, scarf flying in the wind, smile on her face, she launched into Jerusalem to find those blessed disciples and tell them the good news.

Life was a daring adventure, and it could change when you least expect it.

If we are a resurrection people, if we worship a resurrected Christ, then that same invitation to adventure waits for us...

As we visit our tombs each day, we may still go like Mary did that morning, expecting the tomb to be sealed and its contents safe within. But one of these days, God may just surprise us. We may show up to find the stone has been rolled away and our tomb has been emptied out, and the particular grief or the fear or the worry that has had its death grip on us has lost some of its hold.

Or maybe one of these days as we sit lamenting our own lives or lamenting the injustices of our world, that's when we'll feel a prickle at the back of our neck. Maybe it'll be a gardener, maybe our partner, or our kid, or maybe it'll be nothing but the breeze in the air, yet through it we will hear our name. And in a moment of profound recognition, that both astounds us and embraces us, we will feel ourselves being called from our tombs, being called to pick up our passions and bring them with us, onto a path toward love and community and justice, where we will create the world anew.

It's possible. It's possible, because in the risen Christ, all things are possible.

With the risen Christ, every morning is an Easter morning. And every morning holds within it the potential for life, and hope, and adventure.

And in a resurrection world, we never know who we might find in the garden outside our tombs. Maybe a gardener. Maybe Christ. Or maybe it'll be some windblown old lady, handing us her goggles and scarf and telling us we're in for one sweet ride.

Whatever the case might be, in a resurrection world we can pretty much guarantee that our life isn't going to be the same. We just need to tune our ears to the One calling us.

What is life for you this day? Is it nothing? Is it a daring adventure?

May you hear God calling your name this Easter Day.

Amen.