

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
April 16, 2017 – Easter!
John 20:1-18

Elaine sent me a little video that's gone viral on the Internet. In it a 3-year-girl and her father are having a conversation. "Are the Easter bunny and Jesus best pals?" she asks. And a minute later, she notes smugly, "And the Easter bunny can't even lay eggs."

I don't think this little girl is alone. There is a lot of confusion around Easter.

How did we get here? What is Easter all about?

Two thousand years ago something profound happened in the Middle East. God was born as a human and lived among the people for 30 odd years. This human being, Jesus, walked, taught, performed miracles. He brought hope to a people who were suffering and longing to be rid of the invaders who occupied their land; the Romans. Some of the people recognized Jesus as the Messiah and left their lives to follow him and become his disciples. But they had no idea *how* they were going to be saved. The religious authorities didn't like what Jesus was saying and doing. The way he spoke truth to power, his ability and willingness to heal - his challenging and bewildering stories threatened them. And as he gained popularity, they wanted to destroy him. So they found a way to unjustly charge Jesus for crimes he did not commit. And he was tortured, killed and crucified on a cross, between two common criminals. Can you

imagine how Jesus' disciples felt? Their dream of freedom was smashed. They were devastated. They had backed the wrong leader. Hope and joy were replaced by fear and despair.

If that had been the end of the story, we wouldn't be here today. No, the impact of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection has rippled out around the world and we are still trying to grasp the enormity of it.

Today we learn how the story turned out. Today we hear how Mary goes to the tomb and finds Jesus there. He is in a form she doesn't recognize until he says her name. And in that instance, she knows her Lord and teacher – the One she has loved and given up her life for. And in that moment, joy replaces sorrow. It's hard to even imagine what the moment must have been like. To go from one extreme to the other – the joy, the wonder, the miracle of it all.

So we don't get to Easter out of nowhere. We get to Easter because of Lent. The 40 days leading up to Easter when Christians are offered the opportunity every year to delve or sink deeper into the mystery that is the Christian faith.

For 40 days we have walked with Jesus as he journeyed with his disciples towards Jerusalem. We listen to his stories, his teachings, we witness his healings, his words of compassion, his love for the people. We eat with him, we listen, we share our own stories and fears. For 40 days we take the time to reflect on our own doubts, our own fears, our selfish ways, our self-centredness – looking at the ways we

behave and think that keep us from loving God and loving others more fully. We fast and pray and keep walking.

And then we get to Holy Week. On Palm Sunday we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The crowds go crazy, cheering him as he enters the city gates. His popularity has preceded him. The people have heard about this Jesus, and press in to see him.

And then things go terribly wrong. The temple authorities make their move. They devise a plan to arrest him; to put an end to him. We follow this turn of events by celebrating his last meal with his followers and then on Good Friday, his trial, and the walk to the place where he will be crucified.

On the cross, Jesus shows us, in full force, the love he has been talking about. He gives up his life without condemning those who convict him; he doesn't lash out, threaten or hurt those around him. In fact, he consoles the thieves who are dying on both sides of him. And, in dying this way, even the guards recognize there is something very special about his person – "Surely, he was the Son of God."

Today's reading brings our Easter story to an ending that no one could have anticipated. An ending that really is a beginning.

In today's reading, Mary - who with only a few others who were courageous enough to stand at the foot of the cross to keep Jesus company as he died in agony - rises early, in the dark, and does the only thing she knows to do in her grief: go to be near the body of the One who was like no other. The one who accepted her, as woman, as one of his disciples. The one who turned life upside down and gave

her a glimpse of God's will for the world. The man who listened, cared and cried. And went to people in their suffering. The one who died and in his agony, still cared for those around him.

In her yearning, her searching, her questioning, Jesus appears to Mary. And turns her world upside down again. Mary becomes the apostle to the apostles. So once again Jesus defies convention and makes a woman a leader in spreading his message.

So here we are at Easter. The day when the grief, loss and pain of the world are turned upside down.

It may look like today is a day like every other day. Well, the sun is shining for a change, and the church is full of flowers and people. But there's been a change on a deeper level, as we open to God's movement in our lives. As we accept that nothing is lost; all is transformed.

Yes, the pain and suffering are still here. Yes, we will still die. Yes, we will experience loss, betrayal and shame. But the difference is, we now know we are not alone. That there is One who has lived with us who understands our human frailty; who experienced life fully with all its ups and downs; and who went to the cross for us to show us how much God loves us, even when we misbehave, when we hurt others, when we hate ourselves.

This God who sent us Jesus longs for our return. Has open arms. Transforms everything from dark into light.

Just as Mary discovered Jesus by the tomb, it is our destiny as well to find Jesus in the most unexpected place. The only requirement

is that we want Jesus. He never imposes or pushes. He never condemns. As we see from the image of the cross, he accepts us, as we are. He doesn't retaliate. He waits patiently for us. With new life. Ready to help us change from the ways we live that close us off from life. Ready to repurpose all our suffering, all our sin, all our darkness into new life.

And so the early Christians developed this pattern of reminder and opportunity every year during Lent. And today we celebrate with billions of Christians around the world, the miracle that brings us together. We are not alone. Our God is a God of unconditional and sustaining love. We are a community hungry for this love; willing to be transformed. And so we gather every Sunday to be reminded that we are loved, that our endings can be beginnings, and that we are not alone. Nourished and encouraged, we go out into the world to share all we've been given. This is the good news!

Thanks be to God. Amen.