

A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
for A Sermon for Every Sunday
Luke 24:1-12

Easter is the most hopeful day in the Christian year – a day we celebrate Christ’s resurrection and the incomparable news that **death never has the last word! Not for Jesus. Not for us.** *God’s word* endures. God’s love triumphs. God’s light keep shining. God’s promises are true, and we can trust them in the darkest valley. That’s something we need to hear, because ... dark valleys are all around.

Easter begins in the valley of the shadow of death, amidst grief and trauma. I don’t want to rush past that. *The Bible* doesn’t rush past that! And ... *this year especially*, you and I recognize the anguish experienced by Christ’s disciples around his death. So despite the attraction of the alleluias, let’s pause for a moment at the entrance to the tomb, and acknowledge the pain we have known and witnessed over the last few years.

I want to co-create a space with you, like Christine Hong did with folks at the NEXT Church National Gathering last year.¹ Christine Hong had been asked to speak about the theme of Breaking, Blessing, and Building: A Call for the Common Good. Before she talked about the dehumanizing patterns our society needs to break apart or the beautiful things we hope we can bless and build together, Hong invited us to hold space for the things, people, places, and losses we were grieving. “You might be carrying anger [she said, and I echo]. You might have sorrow that has been so deeply embedded in your body, you might not recognize it anymore. You might just feel empty. If you’d like, you can close your eyes and *picture* what and whom you are grieving.

Pay attention to what is rising up in you, and as you notice what’s coming up.

I invite you to **cup your hands** and hold the feelings that are welling up as you gaze on the faces of loved ones, of people gone too soon, of other people’s expressions of pain, of the loss of relationships, of time, perhaps even of hope. **Hold in your hands** your feelings of grief – the pain and trauma these past years have brought to you. Hold them and acknowledge them. They are part of you, too.”

I invite you to take a deep breath in, and let it out, as you release your hands.

It struck me, reading the gospel this year, how Easter comes to people whose hands are full of grief. What the women are actually carrying – those spices – point to their loss. They intend to anoint the body of someone they have dearly loved. His death was not a peaceful one, as you know. Jesus was beaten, bloodied, crucified – the boot of the Empire crushing his neck. There is no question it was traumatic for Jesus and for everyone who loved him and witnessed this. They’d experienced the horror of seeing a life snuffed out, fear for their own lives, and the heart-wrenching question: could they have done *anything* to have made a difference? Underlying their trauma, Christ’s disciples felt a grief common to most all of us, as most of us

have lost *someone* important to us. After this pandemic, we can also relate to the way Christ's friends had to watch him suffer from a distance – unable to touch him or hold him. That's been the experience for many people with COVID. Christ's friends felt the finality of his death as we have felt the finality of death. If you've known great grief in the last few years, you have company among the friends of Jesus.

In one of the conversations my congregation's governing board had recently about the work of anti-racism, our coach, Shani McIlwain, said that ***loss is God's biggest attention getter***. We were talking about church stuff, so, what came to mind were losses related to membership and budgets and programs like in-person worship. But it's true in regard to any loss – the loss of a job, for instance, or the loss of a home or a relationship or a life. These losses get our attention, so that we stop. We take stock of our lives. We evaluate what's been good (and bad!) ... what matters ... what we really want. These are moments into which, I believe, God often steps. Or perhaps we're just more *open* in these times – more receptive to *seeing God* who is *always* standing near, trying to catch our attention and hoping to offer some help.

When the women entered that tomb, God got their attention in a big way. First of all, Jesus' body was gone! As they started wondering what to make of this, two men in bright clothing appeared with a searing question: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?* Jesus had been raised, the men said. *Remember what he told you:* that he'd be handed over, crucified, and on the third day rise again. You can almost see the light bulb come on, as the women remember Christ's words.

We know more of the story, so we know Christ's disciples *SEE him* later – on the road to Emmaeus and in Jerusalem and as Christ ascends into heaven. *Eventually*, they see him raised. But that hasn't happened yet. I find it helpful to pause here, because in this moment, the women are a lot like us. If they have faith, it's without sight. If they believe Jesus has risen, it's because they are trusting what they've been told.

One of the things I've done recently is to help lead confirmation classes for my congregation's young people. It's been wonderful to read the stories of scripture with them. We've studied the beatitudes of Jesus – Christ's vision of a world where all God's children are loved and cared for, and no one's left out. We've enacted the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet – recalling how love pours itself out in service, which is sometimes messy and embarrassing work. We've remembered how Jesus took bread and said, "This is my body given for you." The nourishment of human bodies mattered to him! We study the stories of Jesus, because *remembering what Jesus said* is an important part of faith and of learning to live as he'd want us to – with love and hope.

Beyond the words themselves, I am mindful of the ways my congregation (and yours too, I'm sure) helps people understand and EMBODY what Jesus said. Often we remark on this after a member of the community has died, and that loss has gotten our attention. In the last year, I've appreciated the way one of our member's care for kids with dyslexia, showed us what it's like to center vulnerable people, as Jesus centered vulnerable people. I've admired the way another

member's efforts to welcome immigrants to this country demonstrated what Jesus meant when he said to welcome the stranger and see all kinds of people as our family in Christ. I've noticed how the great interest another member took in people helped them to feel God's attentiveness to every one of God's children. I've marveled at the way another member's performance of church music – so beautiful and soaring – gave us a taste of Christ's grace and peace. That's another way we remember the words of Jesus ... as we've experienced them in one another.

The women are encouraged to remember what Jesus said. Those luminous men in the tomb also urge them *to seek Christ among the living*. This reminded me of something said in one of our anti-racism webinars: that we shouldn't ask, "What would Jesus do?" as if he lived only in the past, and what we knew about him was over and done – some static example we might apply today in similar circumstances. It's better to ask *what Jesus IS DOING*. *How is God being revealed to us now*, in our worship and work, and in the world around us?

The good news spoken on Easter is that Jesus is alive! And he is active. *And we can be looking for him anywhere his people are alive and active!* In hospitals, where nurses attend to patients with tenderness and skill. In schools, where teachers offer instruction that leads to insight. In courtrooms where truth is spoken, and justice is done. In organizations where community is built, and creation is carefully tended. In homes where love and forgiveness are practiced. **Christ is alive and active** with all the grief-holding, violence-confronting, death-confounding, life-bestowing **power of Easter!**

Last year Bryan Stevenson spoke to the Richmond Forum here in Virginia. Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer best known for his work with Black men on death row; his book, *Just Mercy* was made into a movie not too long ago. As part of his talk, Stevenson told a story connected to a memorial that's part of the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial features jars of soil from places Black people were lynched. Their bodies never received a proper burial, but this soil contains their sweat and blood, as well as the tears of people who were segregated and humiliated at various times in U.S. history.

Stevenson told about a middle-aged Black woman who'd gone to collect soil in a pretty remote location. When she got there, she felt anxious – dirt road, middle of nowhere. She found the place where the lynching had taken place, took her jar to the spot, and began to dig up the soil. All of a sudden, a truck drove by ... big white guy staring at her from the cab. A bit down the road, the truck slowed, stopped, turned around and drove back. The man parked his truck and walked toward her. Now she was really scared.

What are you doing? he asked. She was thinking she'd tell him she was just gathering dirt for a garden, but then something got ahold of her. She said, "I'm digging soil, because this is where a Black man was lynched in 1937 and I'm going to honor his life today." The man saw a paper on the ground near the woman. He said, "Does that paper talk about the lynching? Could I read it?" And he did. Then he shocked her by saying, "Excuse me, ma'am ... Would it be all right if I helped you?"

He got down on his knees next to her. She offered him the implement to dig the soil. He said, “No, no, I’ll just use my hands.” And he started to dig the earth with his hands. His hands became black with soil.

There was something about the conviction with which he was digging that moved the woman, and a tear rolled down her face. He saw it and said, “I’m so sorry, I’m upsetting you!” She said, “No, no. You’re blessing me.” The man’s digging had slowed, and she realized he was crying, too. She asked if he was all right, and he said, “No ma’am. I’m just so worried it might have been my grandfather that helped to lynch this man.”

They sat together just weeping. Then they finished filling the jar with soil. The man said, “I’d like to take a picture of you holding the jar.” She said the same. So they took pictures of one another. Then the man followed her back to the museum; they delivered the soil together.

Jesus Christ is alive and at work in the world. Stories like this give me *hope* that no matter what we hold in our hands, be it blood-soaked soil, or memories of loved ones lost, or regret about things we’ve done or haven’t done – *whatever it is* that grieves us or frightens us or holds us captive, **God can transform it. God can redeem it.** Jesus Christ is alive and at work even now, in more places than we can imagine. He cultivates in us a death-defeating Easter power to bring wholeness out of brokenness ... freedom out of oppression ... love out of hate ... life out of death.

We may not see that yet (or see it often) but we *WILL* see it, like Christ’s friends came to see it. That’s the good news of this day. That’s the good news FOR today. May it inspire our living, our hoping, our singing – this day and every day.

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ⁱ <https://nextchurch.net/gathering/leaders/>