

**Easter Sunday**  
**April 12, 2020**  
**The Rev. Scott Walters**

Of the many sayings of my late mother in law, Cora Pote, perhaps the most vivid and enduring to me is, “White flour will kill a dog faster than starvation.”

Now this might sound to you like a Zen koan or, maybe something Mark Twain would have said. It might sound like a phrase meant to draw us into the subtler mysteries or ironies of life. Which just means you never met Cora Pote. There was nothing subtle about Cora, and she had no use for irony. Irony was an entirely foreign language, which made us all look like obnoxious tourists when we tried to explain a joke to her, repeating the same words more slowly, in louder voices, adding hand gestures and accents to no avail.

No, Cora Pote took the world in front of her so much for what it was that she was known to pray audibly for movie characters. This was instinctive to her, praying for whoever might need it as soon as she realized they did. I’m guessing it didn’t occur to her that should God answer her prayer and alter the plot just this once, all the air would leak out of the story like an untied balloon and there’d be no more movie at all. For all you Coras in the congregation, there are footnotes in the PDF version of the sermon that explain that really clever balloon/movie plot metaphor I just used.

But back to the traditional Easter images of white flour and a dead dog. What the phrase meant was that... well... like everything else Cora ever said, it meant what it meant. It meant that white flour will kill a dog faster than starvation. I won’t go far into the purported biology of the statement. Suffice it to say that if Cora had thought Jesus’s saying that what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven involved our digestive systems she would have prayed about nothing else for the rest of her life.

But there was more to her theory than that. Somebody once pointed out that white flour doesn’t spoil as quickly as whole grains. To which she said, “Well, of course it doesn’t. The bugs know there’s nothing in it they can live on.” Her main beef with white flour was that we’d killed it in an attempt to make it pure, safe, less uncertain. We took everything nourishing out under the presumptuous illusion that we can put whatever we need right back in and pass it off as “enriched.”

I fear that I’ve done this a time or two with the Resurrection. Have you?

Have you ever come to the Easter story with a sense that we can take out whatever seems unhelpful, unbelievable, incomprehensible, or strange? And then enrich it with the meanings we think we need? I almost certainly will again before I finish this sermon. All I know to do is to come clean and ask you to agree with me that what we hope to do this Easter morning is to take our lives as they actually are to the Good News as it actually is and trust that what we are most in need of God has already knit deep within it.

In thinking and praying — which, to be honest, often felt more like worrying and obsessing — about what one might say on an Easter like this one, a sense began to grow that today we might actually be a little more prepared to enter the story that’s been handed down to us, maybe because it’s hard even to say what we need from it right now. But maybe also because, especially in the gospel of John, the morning is dark, and quiet, and strange.

On the first Easter there is no heavenly choir of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest!" That happened when Christ was a helpless, bundled up newborn. On Easter the two angels present are missed by the disciples whom Mary Magdalene has summoned to the empty tomb. Peter and the other disciple have already left the scene they were late to. And Mary is weeping by herself when she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been.

But there's still no chorus of alleluias. There's still nothing but a tender and quiet conversation, if not still in the darkness of night, then in the first faint light of the day. Mary's grief and confusion are such that she's not even shaken by the appearance of these angels. "Why are you weeping," they ask? And Mary, through her tears, quietly explains the situation. The body of her Lord is gone, and she doesn't know where they have laid him.

Then she turns and someone else is there. Someone she thought must be the gardener. Someone who says, just as the angels did, "Why are you weeping?" But the one standing in front of her now is different. He seems real enough to ask what she didn't ask the angels: "Have you carried him away? If you have, tell me where you have laid the body of my beloved friend. I will take it. Please let me take it and tend to it." And then the risen Jesus says her name. And Mary sees.

The story we might imagine we need would play out predictably from here. The confusion and incomprehension and misunderstandings that drove the plot up till now can be resolved. This is how happy endings become happy, right? All the injustice of the trial and even of the horrific execution when the hope that was constricting from the time the hosannas of Palm Sunday died down, constricting to a pin prick of light on Good Friday and then went entirely out. Impossibly, none of this was the end. He is risen. We know how the play should play out. With a party, preferably a big raucous one after a wedding.

But that's not what happens at all. The world stays quietly strange not just for Easter, but right through the end of John's gospel.

It's worth remembering that this is the gospel in which Jesus's thundering "I am he" in the garden of Gethsemane knocks the guards who've come to arrest him off their feet. It seems to have primed us well for a grand and victorious finale.

But here's what happens. Post resurrection, the upper room is still locked a whole week later, when Thomas, who missed the first appearance, is saying he can't quite believe it, when Jesus appears again. And after that it's at a charcoal fire on the seashore, where disciples are roasting fish and Jesus wanders up and eats with them and asks Peter three times if he loves him. Where three times Peter answers, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you." A little more heartbroken and confused each time that Jesus thinks he needs to be asked.

Here is where I may be bringing what I need this story to be to it, but I hope I'm just bringing my life as it is, your lives as they are. Because I typed these words yesterday in an upper room in our house, on the rickety card table we've set up by the daybed as my office during these strange, quiet, frightening days of so-called "Safer at Home."

And that's where and when it hit me. Mary Magdalene wore no Easter bonnet to the tomb. The angels didn't sing anything at all, much less "Jesus Christ is risen today." I put to you that the quiet of our lives right now bears resemblances that are deeply real to the quiet, not only of the first Easter morning, but of the whole of Holy Week through the Last Supper and Good Friday and also off into the weeks after the Resurrection and beyond.

It is into a world not so unlike our own right now, a world no one saw coming and no one yet knows quite how to inhabit, that the risen Christ comes. And when he comes he still doesn't say, "You've got nothing to worry about now. I'm king of the universe and Satan didn't have a chance." No. What he says are things like, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "Reach out, put your

hand in my side. Do not doubt, but believe” Things like, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Feed my lambs.”

Which sounds for all the world to me like the voice of mercy itself, back from the dead, searching out people who might well be us.

Friends, whatever the resurrection was and is, whatever the resurrection did or does in the mystery of God or the mundaneness of your life... what it feels like, at least to this particular Christian on this particular Easter morning, is not like a supernatural enrichment to this deadly world of violence and cruelty, like an afterthought of vitamins to a loaf of lifeless white bread. What it does feel like to me is that the world as it really is was laid open to its very core.

And what we find at the core of everything, is not the violence and the nothingness. At the core lives this mercy.

What comes to us through the cross and the tomb...What comes to us through the locked doors of our strange and frightened lives...What comes to us through the invitation to touch the wounds that remain is a mercy more real than the violence. A mercy we wouldn't have even known to ask of this story, but a mercy that is made, not for happily ever after endings, but for lives just like ours right now.

I suppose my prayer is that the strangeness of this Easter morning, streaming from an empty Calvary chancel to your locked and shrinking room, becomes a portal through which we might find ourselves in the quiet strangeness of the Resurrection when it was new. And find that the mercy of God in the risen Christ is searching us quietly out, even now. Saying, “Why are you weeping?” “Reach out, put your hand in my side.” “Do you love me?” “Feed my lambs.”