

Easter Sunday Sermon 2020 'Bags of Hope' Rev. Jane Courtright

Who will ever forget the first pictures we saw of people infected with Coronavirus, laying on hospital beds, with face masks on, hooked up to ventilators? Then later, pictures of people who had died in sealed body bags, at first a few, then all over the world, more and more body bags. These pictures continue to shock and dismay us! What an incredible tragic is this Pandemic. Over 200,000 people have already died as a result of the Coronavirus worldwide!



Except for remote or other areas where these body bags are not available (there is a shortage,) they are composed of polyethylene, a plastic material which prevents any leakage of germs or viruses.

Polyethylene is also used in many life-giving and promoting products, such as medicines to ease digestive and abdominal ailments. It is used with medical imaging to determine the size and location of a malignant tumors to enable treatment. Plastics are also used in the construction of ventilator tubes, which sustain life at vulnerable moments, such as when patients are having trouble breathing due to Coronavirus.

This plastic, which is used to nurture and improve lives, is also the makeup of bags now filled with dead bodies. Plastic to promote life have now become bag or shrouds of death! The bitter irony of it is almost too much. Could it be that what the world needs now, is for someone wrapped in the shrouds or bags of death to come and bring new life and hope to our world? What if a body bag could somehow become a garment of life? If so, who would ever believe such a story?!

We are told in our Easter Gospel reading that Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James (many scholars believe that James was Jesus' brother,) and Salome went to grieve the dead Jesus and to anoint him. They couldn't think of anything else they could do to help! They were full of anguish. When Jesus died, a part of them died also. It is human to feel death as a loss. As Christians, we believe that death is a passage to a new life. The death of a loved

one, however, doesn't often feel like a joyous 'bon voyage.' It feels like a wrenching, jolting pain.

For these women, it was not only the loss of someone they loved deeply, but the loss of someone they had hoped would bring new life. So, when they went to the tomb, they not only lost someone they love, they lost their hope for the future. The women's tears were surely mixed with confusion when they saw that the stone covering the tomb had been moved. Did someone take Jesus' body? That would only add to the irony and humiliation of his death.

But when they went into the tomb, they saw a young man who told them that Jesus was no longer dead, in fact, that they would see him soon. They were to go and tell the other disciples this news! Yes, somehow, amazingly, Jesus was no longer dead. The incredible was true: the bag or shroud of death had become the garment of life!

It's like something that I experienced as a 'newbie' gardener years ago. I had attempted to grow a garden without pesticides or chemicals. I had some success and some plants that just did not produce. It seemed the only plants that had a great harvest were my hot pepper plants! The bugs and animals in my area didn't find them tasty! At the end of fall, I uprooted the plants and threw them in a backyard burn pile. I was amazed, almost stunned, when I saw tomatoes growing out of that dead burn pile the following summer!

On that first Easter day, life also came out of death! And what was the women's response to this news? Afraid and amazed, we are told that they ran from the tomb and said not a word of it to anyone! We might be tempted to judge these women unfairly. To do so though, would be to underestimate our concept of the power and finality of death. Let's face it, we don't expect the dead to rise to life! Some of us don't even expect life from a dead burn pile! It's completely normal that these women would not understand.

God knows, we also can fail to read signs of new life. The Good News for us on this Easter Sunday is the astounding reality of the presence of our Risen Christ. God does not give up on us! God has many ways of showing us that death is not the end. During this challenging pandemic time, let's keep our eyes, ears and spirits open to signs of new life!

Like the women in our Easter Story, during Lent and Holy Week, you and I watched Jesus travel toward his death. It seemed like defeat. But the bag or shroud of death is transformed by God to become a garment of new life.

Easter was never meant to make things go back to 'normal,' but was and STILL IS meant to make all things 'new.' Many people are wondering when we will go back to 'normal.' But we won't, we really can't. We will change in ways we can't entirely control or predict. Who will you be when this pandemic has passed?

In this Covid19 moment in history, God's message to us could be, "I can, and we can, make these things that have been revealed, new." On that first Easter, a movement began whose message is that all things can be made new! Let us, with God, within this pandemic and after it passes, make a beautiful, bright garment of life!

CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA! AMEN.

A note from a changed woman:

