

We gather to celebrate the promise and gift of new life in Christ. We have circled the sun once again and the new light of this day is shining. Although snow covered the ground late Thursday and early Friday the buds on the tree outside my office hold fast. Spring will be sprung. Sunday is here! God has raised Jesus from the dead! In our bible story Mary let go of the reality of death! The risen Christ shows that death is not the final word!

SLIDE 1 – empty tomb

The first appearance of the resurrected Jesus in John's gospel is to Mary Magdalene but it happens at the end of our reading for today. The first thing that is known in John's story is that the stone of the tomb is rolled away. Mary comes to the tomb when it is still dark. The story progresses slowly. Mary, Peter and the other disciple appear to be resigned to what they have known about death all along, it is final and nothing can be changed.

What we actually see, what we are willing to see, determines what we believe, what we will give witness to. I imagine Mary knew some things about Jesus since she was one of those seen nearby as he hung on the cross.

Mary Magdalene knew that in Jesus there is love that can break down barriers, that transcends boundaries. Mary likely knew that Jesus could multiply loaves, give the blind sight, and raise a man to life. But the suffering of Jesus – the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus was a bloody, chaotic, and cruel affair. She was near the cross at the end and saw him breathe his last breath. She knew where he was buried. The present reality was that Jesus died and with him died her hopes and dreams. If she could only go one more time to his body, to the site of his grave, and grieve there.

SLIDE 2 – Jesus revealing self to Mary

When Mary Magdalene arrived in the morning the grave was not in order. The stone was rolled back. The entrance was open. Her first thought was that the body of Jesus had been stolen. She went back to what she knew about life and death, that death was an ending. Mary shared her discovery with the disciples. Peter and the beloved disciple race each other to the tomb like a couple of boys competing to be the first one to reach the goal. They look and come to the same

conclusion, the body is gone. They return to their home, but they do not share any good news, they are not telling any story of new life. Instead they are resigned to seeing things as they are used to seeing. Jesus had a good run, but death is always the end. Someone probably stole the body. It is hard to let go of thinking about the ways things are when they have always been that way.

Several years ago I heard a story on Moth Radio told by Arthur Bradford, an author and filmmaker. It is a story that shows it is difficult to be in touch with one's true self, and be attentive to the murmurings of ones' heart. When Bradford was in his early 20's he was a counselor a few years at a summer camp for people with disabilities. There he met Ronnie. Ronnie had cerebral palsy that affected his legs, autism, and obsessive compulsive disorder. He had spent most of his childhood in hospitals and he came to look at Chad Everett, who played Dr. Joe Gannon on *Medical Center*, a TV series from 1969-1976, as his spiritual brother.

Bradford interested in making films would take out his video camera and create newscasts at camp. Ronnie was drawn to the camera and had a unique ability to interview people when they would go downtown. He would end up leaning on his interviewees because of his weak legs, and get them to do skits with him, and he generally had the ability to bring people out.

One year Bradford got funding to film outside of the camp. A group took five people with disabilities from their homes in New England to Los Angeles, California. Each person had their own dream for going to California. Ronnie's dream overshadowed them all. He believed he was destined to meet Mr. Chad Everett, whom he called his spiritual brother.

Bradford roomed with Ronnie at their hotel stays, assisting him with his personal needs. Every night they would kneel beside the bed and Ronnie would pray, "Bless my mother, my brothers and sisters, my pastor back home in New Hampshire. God, bless Bob Hope and Cher... and all three of Charlie's Angels Especially Jaclyn Smith. And Lord, please help us get to California quickly, where I know I'm going to meet my spiritual brother, Mr. Chad Everett."

Bradford had the unhappy task of trying to remind Ronnie that this might not happen. Everett's agent said the actor was too busy. He could not get Ronnie to

let go of his dream. When the group reached California they had a wonderful moment. They went swimming in the ocean. Everyone was happy except Ronnie. They had to return home without meeting Everett.

Bradford made his film which included Ronnie interviewing many people and even talking about his quest to meet Mr. Chad Everett. Bradford distributed the film at festivals. One day he was surprised to find Chad Everett on the other end of a phone call. Within weeks Bradford had arranged a meeting between Ronnie and Everett. For two weeks straight Ronnie couldn't sleep. Every day he would call Bradford and recite what was going to happen.

Bradford himself was nervous. He arranged a meeting on the beach, but as he was getting set to film he regretted his choice because Ronnie had trouble even standing in the sand. It was too late to make any change of revue. They waited. Then a car pulled up and it was Everett. Ronnie pulled himself to his feet and began to run as best as he could all the time shouting, "Chad Everett! Chad Everett! Chad Everett!" Bradford ran after him video taping the event.

Everett was counseling, "Slow down. Slow down. Slow down." But he didn't. Ronnie and Chad met, embraced, and did skits together. Ronnie interviewed Everett and they prayed together. The joy in Ronnie's heart could not be contained. It spilled out in his shouts, his embrace, in his interview and playfulness with Everett. It was evident on film. On the flight home, Ronnie quickly fell to sleep now that he had met his spiritual brother.

Bradford finished his film of this meeting and was pleased with his work. He looked for new opportunities to hone his craft. Ronnie developed a friendship with Chad, with Everett calling every Sunday, when Ronnie was diagnosed with leukemia, and through his treatments, on up to his death. A few years from the marvelous encounter with Everett, Bradford wondered if being caught up with Ronnie's big dream had been worth his time all those years, after all it wasn't his dream. Then one day he got a call from his editor. The editor told him he had an audio clip Bradford might find funny. It was from the meeting that day on the beach between Ronnie and Everett. Bradford had always worked with audio with Ronnie's voice and but the editor had discovered a parallel recording of Bradford's voice when Everett first arrived at the beach.

First he heard the sound of heaving breathing like someone on the run. And then he heard his voice say, “My God, my God, as if to declare, ‘this is really happening!’” He then noticed something he had not been aware of, his own joy in seeing the dream of Ronnie fulfilled. He had been so mentally caught up in capturing the video, in doing his craft, in trying to develop his craft, in caring for Ronnie that he had missed how he felt about the experience. He missed sensing the joy that he shared with Ronnie at the fulfillment of Ronnie’s dream. He was so caught up in holding himself together to get the best film, to care for Ronnie, that a part of him was not really in the moment. He had not expected to feel that joy, and so he did not notice it in the moment.

SLIDE 3 – joy in the presence of God

What we actually see, what we are willing to see, determines what we believe, what we will give witness to. When Bradford was reviewed an old audio recording he recognized that his own heart had leapt with joy at a dream fulfilled. At the beginning of the day on the first Easter, no one saw more than the death. Mary Magdalene was so troubled by the events of the week and Jesus death that she was not able to see the resurrected Jesus in the moment. When Jesus called out her name, however, she recognized her Lord. It is not until Jesus calls Mary by name that she notices him as her Lord. Like the sheep who know and recognize the voice of the shepherd as he calls them by name, Mary recognizes Jesus the moment he calls her by name. In that moment Mary’s sorrow is turned into joy.

Times of extended crisis take a toll on human life and on the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of people. The last time we were here for Easter was in 2019. The challenge to the totality of human health is an invitation to the church to do a new thing. A number of Christian communities are beginning contemplative practices that provide support for community. I myself am beginning to learn the practice of mindfulness and have discovered that the practice supports my faith development.

SLIDE 4 – mosaic of dance

Let go and let God. It’s one of the Christian community sayings about mindfulness. “Don’t just do something, sit there.” The practice explores a different way to encounter God in a time when so much is suddenly different. Meditation is at the root of letting go. Greater awareness.

The practice is a combination of Concentration – Mindfulness – lovingkindness = community. The practices are not about us. Instead they are for the good of all. It can lead to be attuned to God in the moment.

I realize this morning how I am in a different place. In 2019, my first Easter at St. John's, I was trying to remember where I needed to process, I was taking in everything that was new, but I was not able to experience the joy of the morning.

The practice of mindfulness is teaching me to be present in the moment, in the work, in the sorrow and in the joy. Trusting God in the ups and downs of daily life can teach the brain of one who practices new patterns of relating to others. Contemplative practices can help one be better attuned to the present moment.

Don't want to miss out on the joy.