

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Easter Sunrise Service at the Home of Nick and Cass Ludington  
April 8, 2007 – 6:30 A.M.

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Can it be so?  
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Can it be so?

So often when faced with stunning, surprising, or tragic events, we wonder, “Can it be?”

In this morning’s reading of Luke, you may notice the name of an unfamiliar woman with Mary the mother of James and May Magdalene: Joanna. These three along with the other women Luke tells us were there, are the first witnesses to the empty tomb on Easter morning.

Imagine what it must have been like. Still reeling, stunned, and in shock from Jesus’ crucifixion on Friday, they arrive at the burial site to anoint the body with spices to find it empty.

Thinking to themselves something like, “Now what?” Thieves? Romans? Animals?

And then, as if to overwhelm them more – two angels – men in dazzling white turn to them and say, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? The one you seek is no longer here.”

Reeling. They must have been reeling as they turned and hurried to tell the disciples what they had witnessed.

Now, about Joanna...

As I prepared for this morning and read this passage, I found myself drawn to Joanna. She does not appear in any of the other gospels, except for Luke. Using the Anchor Bible Dictionary and some other resources, I discovered that Joanna was one of the first followers of Jesus, a disciple of his from early in his ministry. She was one of the major benefactors of his ministry, using her own wealth to support Jesus and his disciples. It is thought that Luke preserved her name in the gospel for these reasons and also because she was one of the Lukan sources, providing the writer of Luke with information that informs his (or her, perhaps) gospel.

However, Joanna was not just a follower and a benefactor. She was an indication of just how much the ministry of Jesus crossed the boundaries of the day and influenced folks far beyond what we know of the times.

Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who as one of Herod's estate managers was a member of the established authorities of the times. Joanna would have been very comfortable with many possessions of her own.

Was it something about her husband's role in the government that disenchanting her? Did she feel her own humanity dominated by the demands of her role as Chuza's wife? No one is sure how, but it is clear that Jesus' message touched her, as it had others affiliated with the government, and she left the regime that would eventually oversee Jesus' execution and followed him beyond his death.

And, there is more. For a woman of her class and status – as for any woman - to leave her family and home to travel with Jesus and to provide assistance for him and his itinerant band of disciples - this would have been unheard of in the Jewish community of the times. Simply, women of the day would never have been allowed to be disciples of a prominent Jewish teacher, much less part of his traveling entourage.

In first century Judaism, such behavior would have been considered scandalous for any woman, but especially for a married woman. Scandalous! You go, girl!

Joanna, like many since her, have seen Jesus as taking down the boundaries of such confinements as gender, age, sexual identity, power, ableism, and more. And, it probably sounded just as good to her heart then as it does to mine – and maybe yours – today.

Clearly, Jesus presented both a religious and social threat to the structure of early Judaism, for he gave all men and women the opportunity to be full-fledged disciples.

And on this day, on this day at the tomb – Joanna, like the others, who had left much to follow this man, had to be asking herself, “What happened?” “Can this really be so?” “What now?”

However this early morning unfolded two millennia ago, what is clear to me is that the disciples had no idea what all of these events would put into motion. Just as we have no idea where Jesus will lead us from here.

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Sometimes, in the most unlikely of places, the name of Jesus appears. Maybe you were like me, caught off guard last week, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, releasing the British captives, stated:

"On the occasion of the birthday of the great prophet [Muhammad] ... and for the occasion of the passing of Christ, I say the Islamic Republic government and the Iranian people – with all powers and legal right to put the soldiers on trial – forgave those 15,"

(referring to the Muslim prophet's birthday on March 30 and the Easter holiday). "This pardon is a gift to the British people," he said.

Wait. The Prophet Muhammad and Jesus Christ being the reason for letting those held go free?

Can it be?

As in all ancient and modern politics intertwined with religion, there is more than meets the eye. Still, for those seeking hope, it seems that even in the most unlikely of places, the power, presence, and the name of Jesus has influence and impact. It gives pause in a way that stirs a glimmer of hope, as compromised as it might be by other agendas, it still glimmers and is somehow wonderfully assuring.

There are many shuttered away under different conditions, like the British captives, the disciples in the upper room, the sick, disenfranchised, homeless poor, aged...many, too many shuttered and shunted away ... who still find hope and power in the presence of God in ways that cannot be quantified, but nonetheless produce glimmers like the rays of the early morning sun. The same morning sun that calls us into service in so many ways.

From the time of the tomb to today, Jesus continues to invite us through our hearts to a grander place – a realm of God – not defined by a particular denomination or religion – but by the language of hope, love, and compassion. Can it be that these things still hold meaning and promise beyond all we know and see?

Apparently, so. It seems that in this world of ours and our beating hearts that Jesus of Nazareth is with us in all sorts of ways.

And so, today, the Easter message is repeated again: do not look for Jesus among the dead. He is here, among us, living and alive in all the ways that this morning and every morning's sun illumines, across all religious, social, political, and economic lines. He is risen and present, indeed.

Amen.