

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John Rohrs
Easter Day 2022

It's easy to forget amongst the wonderful flowers and music and Alleluia banners, but the story of Easter begins with heartbreak. Mary Magdalene finds the tomb uncovered and she's convinced that someone has taken his body. All that's left to do is weep. But Peter and John sprint past her and look inside. They see a pile of clothes, which sparks a hint of hope. The Scripture says they saw and believed, though they did not understand.

The scene shifts, and Jesus appears to Mary. She doesn't recognize him until he calls her name, which is interesting. It goes to show that the risen Christ comes to us at different times and in different ways. Peter and John looked inside the tomb; for them, seeing was believing. Mary needed to hear his voice, like the Good Shepherd calling the sheep. In the next chapter, Jesus appears to Thomas, who has to touch his side to believe. Jesus comes to each of them in turn, jolting their senses and moving them from heartbreak to hope.

It seems like a sudden shift from one extreme to another, but I want to suggest that those emotions are intertwined. If you want to hope, to truly and deeply hope for something, sometimes you have to feel its loss. It's almost as if heartbreak creates the space, or the conditions in which lasting hope might be born. The crucifixion of Jesus is such a tragic and ugly scene; it represents the worst of humanity, and our capacity for fear and greed and violence. The cross is a symbol of God's heartbreak, and ours. But that's not all it is. It is equally a symbol of the depth of God's love. And that's why – out of that heartbreak, at that very intersection – hope springs forth.

Last week, I was asked to do the benediction for a ceremony at the Botanical Garden. It was an event to honor the 200 Black women and 20 Black men who cleared the land and planted the first azaleas in 1939. They were paid twenty-five cents an hour, and it was brutal work. About half the land was forested and the other half was swampland, full of snakes and bugs. They had nothing but shovels and axes to clear it away. Imagine! But that's not why they do this commemoration. They

do it because those 220 workers weren't allowed back into the garden they created for 27 years, thanks to the cruelty of segregation.

The Garden holds this annual event as a form of atonement and celebration. They confess the sins of the past; they acknowledge the sacrifice of those workers and the ugliness of Jim Crow. But at the same time, they celebrate the fortitude of those men and women and the beauty they brought forth. The most moving part is when they read the names of the workers as the guests look out over the garden. You might imagine it was solemn, but just the opposite. At the sound of several of the names, descendants jumped up from their chairs to holler and cheer. Their exuberance shifted the whole room from heartbreak to hope.

What I saw in that moment was the alchemy of transformation. I saw land transformed from overgrown and dangerous to beautiful and inviting. More importantly, I saw people transformed. The speakers didn't run from the cruelty of the past. They told the truth, and you could tell that somehow that in itself brought healing to those families. It helped them embrace the stories of their ancestors. It gave them confidence that the seeds of their grandparents' lives were not lost but were growing into something new and beautiful and free.

This week, we have told the truth of another ugly story, a story of such betrayal and tragedy that it resonates across the centuries. We have read the Passion, stripped the altar, and walked the way of the cross. And in doing so, we have brought to mind the crosses we bear in our own lives and in the world today – the brutality of war, the ugliness of injustice, the uncertainty of illness, and the tragedy of death. In the face of heartbreaks like these, we may weep or even despair, but whether we know it or not, we are at the same time making room for hope. We are calling forth God's love, and God always hears our cry. This morning, God invites us, like the disciples so long ago, to peek inside the tomb, to listen for our names, to touch and to believe. God invites us to be surprised by hope, to see that life endures and that beauty is all around us. God invites us to go forth from this place and tell the truth to a world in need. The truth is this: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Alleluia!