

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

There is a very interesting aspect about the resurrection appearances about which we do not hear very much. Who was the first to see the resurrected Lord in ALL of the gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? It is the same in all four gospels. That one aspect is that in all four cases it was a woman who was the first witness to the resurrection! In all four gospels, the first person to see the resurrected Lord was Mary Magdalene. On that first Easter morning she sees the tomb is empty. Reports it to Simon Peter and another disciple. Those two men run to the tomb and see it is empty. They return to their homes, leaving Mary behind at the tomb. And then Jesus appears to Mary. At first she does not recognize him. We are not told why she did not. When Jesus speaks to her, she recognizes him. She is the first to see the resurrected Jesus.

In Jesus commissions Mary to go and announce that he has risen from the dead, announce the good news of the resurrection. Jesus sends Mary Magdalene to witness to the resurrection. Mary Magdalene proclaims the resurrection, the central event for us as Christians. The word "apostle" literally means "one sent," so some scholars consider Mary to be the first apostle. This woman is literally an apostle. She literally takes on the role of a preacher, a pastor, an evangelist. She proclaims, she witnesses.

So why the big deal about women being the first witnesses to the resurrection? In that time and within the culture of this story, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Legally a woman's testimony to an occurrence like this one would not have been admissible in court. And so it is all the more remarkable that Jesus would entrust this profoundly important message to women! Contrast Jesus' treatment of women to the limitations that some churches place on women. Some churches do not permit

women to be leaders: they cannot be ordained as pastors; cannot serve on the ruling boards of their churches; cannot teach boys over a certain age. These resurrection appearances are not a hard justification for giving women full equality in the church. However, if the church is adamant about the subservient role of women in the church, why did Jesus appear first to a woman? Why would Jesus have chosen a woman to be an apostle, to be the first witness of the resurrection, to proclaim the resurrection? Did this not make her an evangelist, an apostle, a preacher?

I don't mean for this Easter message to be a message about feminism. I'm using that to illustrate that what we celebrate today, the resurrection, is a celebration of the new life that God now offers us. The resurrection not only defeats the power of death, the resurrection is not only victorious over death, it is victorious over all the dark powers of the world. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul declares that Christ will destroy "every ruler and every authority and power, referring to the demonic powers. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Because of Christ's defeat over death and all the demonic powers of the world, what we are offered in the resurrection is new life, not just everlasting life.

This act of baptism this morning represents this new life that we are given in the resurrection. In Scripture, we read that we are buried with Christ in baptism, in which we are also raised with him. We are raised to a new life because of the resurrection. We rarely do baptism by immersion, but the going down into the water represents being buried with Christ, and coming up from the water represents being raised to new life in Christ. In our baptism, we have all been raised to a new life.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is another example of God's people experiencing new life through the resurrection. Peter was summoned by God to the home of some Gentiles, Cornelius and some of his relatives and friends. Now Jews were to have no involvement, no contact, with Gentiles. Yet, because he is summoned by God, he goes to these Gentiles and proclaims the ministry of Jesus, including the crucifixion and the resurrection. Peter discovers and proclaims to these Gentiles that God shows no partiality. Whereas the Jews traditionally believed that the Gentiles were not God's people, Peter learns differently. In God's eyes there is no lower class of people. God shows no partiality. In God's eyes, there are no outsiders. In God's eyes, no one is excluded.

There are so many ways we separate people, "such as power, material goods, wealth, racism, classism, sexism and all the various 'isms.'" You all know how it feels if you have been excluded from some dinner party, an outing of friends, or even a family gathering. There are social, mental, and economic ramifications for those who are excluded. God includes and invites us all. Jesus resurrection overcomes the damage that is done by building boundaries and excluding others. All are included. This is another example of the new life offered in the resurrection.

Cynthia, of Nashville, Tennessee, was introduced to moonshine at age five and marijuana at age six. She was raped by a cousin at age eight. Her father died when she was nine. She began living on the streets. She had a baby when she was thirteen. Things continued to decline as she got into drugs. She had two more children while bouncing in and out of drug treatment programs. At one point she weighed only sixty-

four pounds. When she finally hit rock bottom, she asked God to either take her life or send her to jail.

She went to jail. In prison she prayed fervently for a month before she finally found a sense of God. After prison, Cynthia went to Magdalene, a two-year residential community for women with a criminal history of prostitution and drug abuse. For the first time in her life, Cynthia knew the love of Christ in a caring community. She became clean from drug addiction and became a store manager for Thistle Farms, Magdalene's cottage business that sells bath and beauty products. She came to know a new life made possible by the power of the resurrection over the dark powers drug addictions and prostitution.

There is no doubt we live in a broken world. There is no doubt that the demonic powers still have power. And yet, in the resurrection, God's kingdom has broken in. New life is possible.

Blessed be the Lord, who has given us
a new birth into a living hope,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.