

Too Good to be True

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger, Easter, 2022

Good morning. In case you're here or tuning in for the first time, or the first time in a long time, I'm Rev. Barb Ballenger. I'm new here myself. It's my fourth Sunday.

Which means that for the last month, I've been doing what you do when you're new at a place. I've been meeting people, learning and immediately forgetting names. And I've been forming a first impression of St Peter's based on people's stories, which have stuck with me.

And my initial sense is that this is a faith community where you don't have to hide. You don't have to hide who you are.

You don't have to hide your pain, your past, your impairments, your story of loss, your convictions, your joys, your identity or your sexuality. You don't have to hide if you are new. All of that seems to be welcome here. Now, I haven't talked to everyone of course, I could be wrong. But that's my first impression.

People generally tend to hide parts of themselves or all of themselves when they fear rejection for whatever reason. Another word for that is shame. If I'm right about St. Peter's, then this is a community where you don't have to go it alone for fear that someone might learn the truth about you and send you packing.

That makes this an Easter community. Because that's what Easter is all about. Jesus' choice to suffer and forgive, to die and redeem, means that we don't have to hide from God. We don't have to be ashamed of who we are or what we've done or left undone. We are assured of the love of a God who sees us fully through human eyes. And that God invites us into the divine life because God loves what God sees.

To be an Easter community means not only that we can receive that love, but that we can also be that loving. We are not only forgiven by Jesus, but we can forgive like Jesus. We not only stand in the light of Jesus, but we can also call others into that light. This is what the grace of God makes possible. To be an Easter Community is to live as the risen body of Christ in the world. And that's a body that doesn't hide who it is.

The Easter gospels all tell us that when Jesus came out of the tomb, he no longer hid who he was – no more speaking in parables, asking his followers to keep his identity under wraps. Maybe that's why folks had a hard time recognizing him at first. Because he was no longer what people had grown accustomed to, he was entirely himself, dazzlingly so. So ironically, folks often didn't recognize him even when he was standing right there. And when they did recognize him, finally, it seemed too good to be true.

The resurrection and all it implies is one of those stories that still seems a little too good to be true, to me. And the story from Luke's gospel today starts the way that any story that's too good to be true begins – with fear and doubt and denial.

Now it must be said that the women who first learn of Jesus' resurrection are very credible sources. They were with Jesus from his early days in Galilee, knew him from the start. In the Gospel of Luke these same women are described by name as people whom Jesus had healed and who then followed him.

They provided for Jesus and his apostles out of their own resources (See Luke 8:1-3): Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them. They had been with the band from the beginning, feeding them, paying the bills, probably doing laundry. And now they were bringing spices to the tomb to tend Jesus' dead body - a last act of gratitude to the one who believed in them.

These were credible women who witnessed to an incredible thing. In today's Gospel, they did not even see the resurrected Jesus. They got the news from strangers. But these faithful women of Israel knew their Scriptures well enough to recognize God's messengers when they saw them. And Jesus' own promises came back to them. And they were convinced. Blessed are those who have not seen but still believe.

The women went back and reported what they had been told to the 11, let's be honest, men, who did not believe them. It was an idle tale, they told the women, who had never been idle a day in their lives. Too good to be true.

And here is where the story of our salvation teeters on the fulcrum of whether these women were going to be doubted and shamed into hiding their truth, or believed into making it widely known. And it was our patron saint, Peter, who came to his senses, set aside his own doubt, and decided to see for himself.

He went and looked into that empty tomb. And Peter went home amazed. Perhaps hoping beyond hope that those things that Jesus had been telling him, which Peter had repeatedly pushed aside and denied, were actually true. For Peter, too good to be true became: with God all things are possible.

This is the kind of truth that's difficult to carry around all by yourself. It takes a community to hold onto a truth like this. Because it protects us from the temptation of hiding it so that no one calls us crazy or accuses us of telling idle tales. When you don't have to hide your truth, when others help you carry it, you can remember things more fully, the Good Friday and the Easter Sunday -- the whole story.

I was listening to the Ezra Klein show yesterday, where he was interviewing the author of a book called *The Body Keeps Score*. His guest was Bessel Van der Kolk, who is an expert on trauma and shame, which struck me as a very appropriate topic for Holy Week.

Van der Kolk said "we are communal creatures, and we survive terrible things by community. ... And once you have the community to go with you, you're not ashamed of yourself anymore because your neighbor may have the same feelings of terror and fear that you have, and you don't feel crazy, and you don't feel like you're worthy of exclusion."

Because that's what happens when people are forced to deny the truth about themselves or what happened to them or what they've seen. They feel "worthy of exclusion." And they want to hide, not only from others but from themselves.

Hiding the truth about ourselves from ourselves is perhaps the handiest way to cope in an incredibly judgmental and merciless world. This is another thing I learned from the Ezra Klein Show: when our mind denies the traumatic and painful things that happen to us, we still keep reliving the truth of the trauma in our bodies, and we blame ourselves for the disconnect when we feel one way and think another. And shame, isolation, unworthiness all follow.

But shame, isolation unworthiness -- those are the things that Jesus died to set us free from. We assume it was just for our bad behavior. But it's so much more than that.

Perhaps the most challenging invitation the risen Jesus makes to us is that we don't have to hide from **ourselves** any more. We don't have to be who we are not in order to earn Christ's love. And we don't have to hide from Jesus when he comes calling. This will be an important lesson for St. Peter when he has to look the risen Christ in the eye and face the fact that he denied he ever knew him. But that's a story for another Sunday.

An Easter Community says you are worthy of *inclusion* because of what Jesus did for all of us, and we will remember it together. Not just on Easter, but every single week.

It takes a community to hold onto a truth that big.

And that's where we come in. On Palm Sunday I said that we are the people of Holy Week. Today we are Easter people. We are the body of the risen Christ. Our call is to create a space, a community of loving relationships, where people don't have to hide. Where they can find themselves, and us and God in a body that is honest about where it hurts and why, and can also be honest about all it cherishes and why.

We live in a world that keeps expecting faith in Christ to be lying among the dead things. It is our work to say to that hurting world – Don't look for the living among the dead. Christ is risen! Alleluia! Come alive with us.

Amen