

April 16, 2017 – An Easter Dunking

John 20:1-18

A couple of weeks ago I was talking to another minister here in Swift Current and he mentioned that they were celebrating baptism on Easter Sunday. This particular church baptizes adults using full immersion. All his previous baptism services had occurred in the outdoors during the summer. So he was a little worried because this would be the first time he was going to use the pool in their sanctuary and he was hoping it would fill properly and not leak. I want our building and property committee to note that that is one issue they don't have to worry about.

But when he talked about baptizing people in a stream or a lake I suddenly felt the sting of baptism envy. I thought, wouldn't it be great to be able to dunk someone in truly living water? But then I realized, I'd be in there too - fully clothed, getting totally soaked. Suddenly a few sprinkles on the head sounded just fine.

It is a thrill to celebrate baptism on Easter Sunday. You may not realize it but this is an ancient tradition that began with some of the earliest Christian congregations. In those days, people were often coming to Christianity from other religions and the church required a long training period (sometimes two or three years) before you could join the church through baptism. When it was deemed that you were ready, your name would be added to a list and then

everyone on the list was baptized on Easter Sunday morning. The congregation would gather at dawn by a local pool or stream and the baptisms would begin. Once you were baptized, you were a member of the Christian church and could therefore share in communion and in all parts of congregational life.

When we baptize babies, children and adults we welcome them into our Christian community. But baptism has other meanings too. We can think of baptism as a visible representation of the transformational love of God. When we sprinkle water on a person's head, the water symbolizes the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in our lives. I'm not saying that anything magical happens in that moment, but baptism represents the possibility of new life. When we turn to God, when we open our hearts to a God that is the essence of love, then we open ourselves to the possibility of rebirth. We open ourselves to the possibility of being reborn again, and again, and again.

In the early church those being baptized would descend into a pool or a stream, be fully submerged and then rise out of the water again. It was as if they had returned to the womb and been reborn. This ritual can also be understood as dying to our old self and rising to a new way of being. Of course, this interpretation makes more sense for those of us who are older and have a lot more baggage to let go of. When we baptize infants and small children, we recognize that it is the parents, the godparents, and the congregation as a whole who are being reminded of their own baptisms and the promise of new life that exists for each one of us. That is why Easter and the celebration of baptism are

such a perfect match; they both remind us that new life is possible when we are deeply connected to Christ, to the essence of Love, to the Ground of our Being.

In today's scripture passage we heard the story of that first Easter morning as it is written in the Gospel of John. In this story, like all the others, it is a woman who arrives first at the tomb and discovers that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. Then Mary of Magdala tells Simon Peter and another disciple and they come and confirm that the body is indeed gone. Mary stays, encounters the angels in the tomb and then turns and sees a stranger standing by the entrance. It is only when he says her name that she recognizes him as her rabbouni, her rabbi. The passage ends with Mary announcing to the other disciples, "I have seen the teacher!"

When this story is told, we often focus on the idea of the empty tomb. In fact, today, our closing hymn uses the phrase, "the tomb was empty," over and over again. Maybe it was, I don't know. Maybe there was some kind of bodily resurrection; but I don't need to believe that in order to believe in the possibility of new life. We could just as easily see the empty tomb as a symbol – like the water that we use for baptism – a symbol of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, of Christ, of the Essence of Love..

Marcus Borg, a biblical scholar wrote, "an alternative way of understanding Easter sees the Easter stories as parables – parables about Jesus. That is, it understands these stories metaphorically. Parable and metaphor are about

meaning. The story of the empty tomb means that death could not hold Jesus, could not stop what he had begun,” (*Speaking Christian*, page 112). Jesus spent his ministry teaching, healing and sharing a message of hope for the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. Jesus had a vision of a world filled with peace and justice and that vision did not die on the cross. That hope and that vision lived on through the lives and the work of his disciples.

Our moderator, Jordan Cantwell, in her Easter message said, “Resurrection is the power of love that confronts the forces that deal in death and hatred and says “You will not have the final word.”” <http://www.united-church.ca/news/moderators-easter-2017-message-resurrection> Jesus continues to live in the hearts and minds of the people who sit here in these pews. Jesus continues to live in the people who spend their lives striving for his vision of God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus continues to live in the Christ, the essence of Love that fills our hearts, our world, our universe.

On this earth we continue to experience the pain of sickness, hunger, loss, betrayal, discrimination, hatred and war. But every time a child is baptized, every time we sing hallelujah and share the story of the empty tomb, we are reminded that the force of love is stronger than death. We are reminded that “the teacher” is with us now just as he was with Mary of Magdala on that first Easter morning.