

Sermon
The Great Vigil of Easter
April 8th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Several years ago I came across a recipe. I think of this recipe often, especially at this time of year. It was a recipe for "Empty Tomb Rolls".

A marshmallow, rolled in butter and sugar and cinnamon, wrapped in puff pastry, then baked. In the baking, the marshmallow disappears so that the roll is empty when you bite into it. Except that the marshmallow hasn't disappeared. It has infused the dough around it with sticky, sweet deliciousness....

Holy Week – from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, to our Vigil this evening – takes us through all the emotions of this life. The jubilation and adulation of Palm Sunday. A bittersweet last meal with friends on Maundy Thursday. The sting of betrayal. Overwhelming fatigue in the darkness of Gethsemane. Denial. Suffering. Domination, and the cold darkness of death on Good Friday. Loss. Absence. And now, this evening, we've kindled a new fire. We've felt the warmth of that fire, seen this place in the glow of the Paschal candle and held flickering flames of new light.

We've heard stories of our faith – the covenant with Israel, Paul's assurance that in our baptism we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. And then, our Gospel passage this evening. In the account we hear this night, from Matthew's Gospel, we hear of an earthquake. The stone is not yet rolled away. An angel appears like lightning, dazzling, and rolls back the stone. It's terrifying, but the angel offers words of assurance. Do not be afraid. He is not here. He has been raised. Come and see where he lay, and go and tell the disciples he has gone ahead to Galilee.

We have Resurrection stories in each of the Gospels. There are similarities in the accounts, but the most striking similarity is the lack of detail. What happened? What happened behind that stone, in the cold, dank, darkness of that tomb?

Rowan Williams says : "...the very untidiness of the Resurrection stories is one of the main reasons for taking them seriously. What's going on is clearly people struggling to find words for something they had not expected."

That's what the Resurrection stories feel like to me: a struggle to find words for something unexpected. Can you imagine the women described in our passage tonight, from Matthew's Gospel, and their feelings of "What is happening here??" You can feel how unexpected it was to see an earthquake, an angel, dazzling, rolling the stone away.

And then, in the midst of the unexpected: do not be afraid. Come and see where he lay, and go and tell the disciples he has gone ahead to Galilee. And they do! They soak in the angel's assurance, and they go – they run with fear and joy. Fear and joy together.

This week, I kept coming back to those empty tomb rolls. I thought, Victoria, are you really going to talk about pastry and marshmallows on this blessed night when we move from darkness to light? When we revisit the stories of our faith? When we affirm our faith and renew our Baptismal Vows? And the answer is: Yes!" The answer is yes, because this night is not about cold hard facts. It's not about a convincing telling of what happened with all the right details.

It's about God's passionate and powerful love, made known in Jesus, saturating not only the walls of that empty tomb but all of creation. It's about the Resurrection – the Risen Christ – infusing our lives, infusing all of creation, like the marshmallow in the roll.

Jesus told his followers that he would be crucified, and that he would be raised. He told them that death would not be the end. He told them that domination, control, oppression, injustice, suffering, death are not the strongest powers. **Love is.** The empty tomb shows us this. That tomb was not a void emptiness. It was potential and possibility.

Richard Rohr, in his book "The Universal Christ", writes that "Resurrection" is another word for change, but particularly positive change—which we tend to see only in the long run. In the short run, it often just looks like death.

Jesus's crucifixion and death is both passionate suffering and passionate, grace-filled love. The cross is wood, stained with blood, sweat, tears, but behind it is the new fire of Resurrection, glowing, infusing it with God's boundless, endless, love. The cross is both the darkness of suffering and death, and the light of love.

The women in Matthew's Gospel go – they run! – with both fear and joy. Jesus is raised and that infuses their fear with deep assurance that lets them feel joy at the same time. God's assurance in Jesus that death is not the strongest power, that love is, infuses all our dark emotions – especially fear – with joy, with hope, and with the potential for transformation.

What looked like death, is change and potential and possibility, glowing, behind the wood of the cross, flowing out of that empty tomb into all of creation.

That change, potential and possibility are found in the path Jesus walked, found in the words written and remembered about him, handed down to us from participants in Jesus' ministry. Those words might be, as Rowan Williams describes, the words of people struggling to find a way to express the unexpected, but those words are there to change *our* expectations, to transform our perspectives and to shape our lives and actions.

Jesus walked a path of love. He refused to give in to the love of power that surrounded him, that turned the wheels of society around him. He refused to give in and he stayed true to God's vision of love. Instead of being swayed by the lure of domination and control, he was constant in his commitment to the power of love. He proclaimed a message of abundance in the midst of scarcity, a message of the power of peaceful, non-violent resistance in the face of domination and control and brutality. A message of justice in the midst of deeply rooted injustice.

That power of love is in each of us, like the marshmallow. The power of love is there, waiting for us to let that marshmallow melt so that it fuels our actions, and moves our hearts and hands and feet in this world. So that our actions are powered by love. So that we stand, strong in that power of love, willing, ready to face and overturn the powers of this world that dominate and control, that perpetrate and perpetuate suffering and violence and injustice.

Sam Wells, author and Vicar of St Martin-in-the-fields in London, England, writes that each of the Gospels "...seem to assume that Jesus' death and resurrection are the hinge of history, that nothing that was true before can ever be assumed to be the same again, and that nothing that was considered impossible before need necessarily be assumed to be impossible after. In short, all bets are off."¹

All bets are off. Nothing is impossible with God. Nothing is impossible with the power of love.

This is what burned in our new fire tonight. This is the sweetness that saturated the walls of that empty tomb. This infuses the waters of our Baptism. Soak it in when you come forward to the font to receive the sign of the cross. Tomorrow, come and share in the Eucharist and taste the sweet deliciousness of potential and possibility in shared bread and wine. The power of God's love, made known in Jesus, made known in the Resurrection is ours. It's in us, it infuses all of creation. Remember that. Soak it up, soak it in, and let it be what fuels you, this night, and always. In Jesus name. Amen.

¹ Wells, Samuel. Power and Passion: Six Characters in Search of Resurrection. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2007.