

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
April 17, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Psalm 118:14-24
John 20:1-18

Sermon: Free at Last (Easter Sunday)

A poem by American poet Billy Collins, called *Today*

*If ever there were a spring day so perfect,
So uplifted by a warm intermittent breeze*

*That it made you want to throw
open all the windows in the house*

*And unlatch the door to the canary's cage,
Indeed rip the little door from its jamb,*

*A day when the cool brick paths
And the garden bursting with peonies*

*Seemed so etched in sunlight
That you felt like taking*

*A hammer to the glass paperweight
On the living room end table,*

*Releasing the inhabitants
From their snow-covered cottage*

*So they could walk out,
holding hands and squinting*

*Into this larger dome of blue and white
Well, today is just that kind of day...*

It's a great risk for a Canadian preacher to write an Easter sermon with that kind of spring imagery. Even when Easter 2022 is almost as late as it can be, using the imagery of spring in a sermon is almost guaranteed to bring on a sudden snow storm! The beginning of spring according to our calendars is based on astronomical definitions, after all, not the actual weather outdoors!

However, I was inspired to save that poem by Billy Collins when it arrived in my inbox on the first day of spring – even though my yard and pathways were full of snow and ice, not peonies!

The image that delighted me the most about the poem was that description of smashing open the snow globe, and freeing those imaginary little cabin dwellers who have been caught in an endless season of winter – after a long Canadian winter, I can relate to the wonder of their liberation. I do love snow globes, and I promise I will not go around smashing any, but that image of the poet freeing both caged canaries and the little snow globe people who were caught in that flipping glass dome, well, that image did my Canadian heart good when I read it back in March.

It's that universal longing for freedom – in our case, the ability to go outdoors without worrying about ice on the sidewalks or snow on the windshield, or putting on all those layers of winter clothing that protect us from the cold weather.

All over the world, however, that longing for freedom is probably one of the most universal emotions –

- The exhausted parent who simply longs to take their child to a wide-open space where the child can run free to play...
- The person who uses a wheelchair and who longs to roll along the sidewalk without worrying about sudden curbs and steps and potholes...
- The refugee or the displaced person who is always watching over their shoulder, never knowing when they might lose their place of shelter or all their belongings...
- The patient in the hospital, attached to tubes and monitors, longing for their health to return and the day of discharge...

All of them are longing for someone to smash whatever it is that is confining them - fear, fatigue, illness, oppression – smash it wide open - allowing them to break free into new life.

Normally when I imagine someone smashing something with a hammer, I would associate that action with anger – destruction – revenge – violence. But this image is unexpected – it is a joyful breaking open – it is freeing rather than hurting, it is a breaking open that signifies liberation instead of wounding or destroying.

And that is the message of Easter joy which we celebrate today.

Gentle Jesus, who went to the cross telling his followers not to defend him with swords or violence, who was a victim of Roman oppression, Jesus has smashed his way out of the tomb, out of death even – and in doing so he has liberated us all for new life!

It's unthinkable, the defeat of death in a world where death is so final. Yet we are the Easter people who contend that the story is true. We do not all agree on what exactly is true about the story – or what that truth means. Some believe in a physical resuscitation of Jesus, while others believe in the profound truth of the spiritual metaphor. Yet we tell the story again and again:

The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, Mary witnessed Jesus' risen presence – all of these clues point to the liberation that God invites us to hope for, believe in, work for and enjoy. When we tell it again and again, we shape our own understanding of death and sorrow and change and new life.

Each year we try to put ourselves in the place of those who lived that first Easter story. Each year we try to find a new angle, or a new approach. But still, most of us know exactly where the clues are taking us.

How difficult it must have been for Mary to become the first witness to the resurrection! For her it was a time of confusion and despair. On Good Friday, the women around the cross had not had a chance to care for Jesus' body in the proper way. There had been too many soldiers and too little time before the sun set, signalling the beginning of the Sabbath. So Mary set out on the day after the Sabbath, at first light, because it was the earliest opportunity she had to do what was needed, what was right. When one was grieving. When someone you love reached the final chapter.

Her heart must have been so heavy, so fearful of what lay ahead. Maybe she concentrated on the sound of gravel beneath her feet, maybe her mind was racing full of questions: would the soldiers still be there? Would they harass or stop her? Would other mourners be there? Who would help her roll away that enormous stone? A dozen soldiers had placed the stone there, and bound it with chains – how could one woman possibly roll it away? Who would dare to smash the chains and the seal of the Roman governor?

Mary didn't know the ending of the story as we do, she could only put one foot in front of the other, hoping and praying that it would be okay. That somehow she could do for Jesus what needed to be done.

Just think about the many times we dream about rolling away some enormous obstacle that has appeared in our path. Maybe it's paying back a student loan or tackling the cost of housing. Maybe it's an illness or a disability. Maybe it's a personality conflict at home or at work. When we start asking "who will roll that enormous stone away for me" many of us give up before we have even started, many of us stop there.

I guess stopping wasn't an option for Mary, however. I mean, she could have run away, or stayed behind a locked door somewhere. She could have waited until more of them were ready to go. But instead she chose to go forward, to offer what little she could. And so she was the first witness, the first one who encountered that most impossible outcome.

When we, as an Easter people, set out to transform the grief and suffering of our own lives, or the world around us, we can and do find ourselves beset by any number of obstacles. We may face conflict, ridicule, accusation and debate, every time we name a personal problem or we share a dream of ending poverty or homelessness or war.

In light of the Easter story, however, we should always approach those impossible obstacles in the light of the resurrection. We should approach our obstacles in the faith that somehow the chains and seals are already smashed. The stone is already rolled away. The soldiers have already taken off. The Easter story red every spring prepares us for a life of expectancy, a life of faith, a lifetime of witness and of hope. We do not stop walking towards our greatest fear, because we believe we are also walking towards new life. Anything is possible.

So in the end, the Easter story is not just a story about how one dead man was resurrected, it is a story about new life for those who are alive now.

As Jesus said to Mary “Who are you looking for?” **He was right there the whole time.** It was only when Mary stopped seeing out of her tunnel vision of fear and despair that she could finally perceive new life standing right in front of her.

Jesus had already been liberated from the suffering and death which Mary expected to find in that place. God had already smashed open the dome of her grief and fear, so that they could emerge, holding hands and squinting into new life. Others would not believe her, but she knew that a new season had begun:

Love is alive! Love lives again! Hallelujah and
Amen!