

Sermon: The Weight of the Blooms

Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley

Scripture: John 20:1-18

As a few of the plants in my house can attest, my green thumb appears to be less green than I or they would prefer. This lack of keen gardening ability does not keep me from trying, hoping mother nature will forgive me when I fail as I often do. One thing I can grow, however, are orchids. For some reason, the orchids are my friend. They seem to thrive, relatively speaking, compared to some of my other plants. When we moved to Hampstead in June, my parents got me a pink orchid that has been growing incredibly well on its watering regimen and in my kitchen window. It's doing so well, in fact, that at one point toward the end of winter, I realized I was about to have a multitude of blooms. There were about 13 buds all together and they began to bloom one at a time across two branches. When about 7 of them had bloomed, we were sitting down to dinner one day and heard a crash into the sink. As beautiful as they were, the weight of the blooms had become too much for the lightweight pot and tipped the entire plant into the sink. In the course of hitting the sink, one of the branches had broken free of the plant.

I've waited since mid-summer for it to bloom again, so losing six of them in the sink felt disappointing to say the least. It had never occurred to me that something so perfect, the blooms of the orchid, could cause the plant to tip and sustain injury.

As we celebrate the blossoming of our faith on this resurrection Sunday, I am reminded of this orchid incident. We must remember that Christian discipleship is a call as much as it is a blessing. That with the beauty of the

faith we share, comes a responsibility to follow in the footsteps of the Savior of the world, to live differently than others do in accordance with what he, himself, taught us throughout his life, death, and resurrection.

Recall the strain that the disciples feel as Jesus foretells his death on the cross. They were incredulous and then they grieved. They were realizing that the joy of loving and following Jesus came with caveats. The joy of discipleship does, too. Because Jesus didn't tell us to love our religion, Jesus told us to love one another. To love our neighbors. To love those no one else loves. In other words, Jesus said love people... messy, imperfect, difficult people. We all know too well, it can sometimes be *hard* to love people. And sometimes in loving them, we will find the outcome is not as positive as we hoped. Sometimes our kindness and love won't be received as we hope.

As a woman who preaches in a tradition known for minimizing the roles of women in church leadership, I know this fact all too well. There are churches even in the UCC that will not hire women to lead them. And yet, as a woman well-trained in my studies at seminary and in life, I know I follow in a long line of women who came before me. Women have been preaching the gospel since the early days of the church. In fact, as is so often forgotten, without woman preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.

Today, we read from the gospel called John. Any casual observer of scripture can probably tell you that the gospel accounts all differ in small and sometimes big ways, even in their retelling of the resurrection story. When I read scripture and there is disagreement, I look to two things:

where else is this issue or event discussed and, most importantly, what is the most *loving* side of this argument? Because before God is anything else, God is love. So if we look to the canonical gospels, and the resurrection story, we can see that all four agree on at least one very specific part of this story and that is that Mary Magdalene was present at the resurrection. Mary was either the first, alone, or was with a few other women who were the first to come across the empty tomb and to see the resurrected Jesus.

You know the stories of Mary in the gospels. You know how she has been called a sinner, a prostitute, maligned by the church for centuries. Like so many women throughout history, Mary Magdalene became a convenient scapegoat for those who wish to minimize the role of women in the church.

It might surprise you to learn that Mary Magdalene is not what Pope Gregory the Great characterized her as in the late sixth century. She is not the sum of multiple women, named Mary or without name at all, who some early church fathers conflated her with to marginalize women's roles in the church and to maintain a very male-centric power structure at the top.

Mary was none of these things. And she was not, as some interpreters will tell you, merely a "messenger" to the real disciples.

Mary witnesses the risen Jesus—first. And if we believe God to have ordained these things, then that was intentional, not so Mary would be the messenger to the messengers, but so that Mary, a woman, could be the first evangelist. Mary is commissioned by Jesus, himself, to preach the good news. About this, there is no disagreement. Paul names two criteria

that make an apostle. Those are the two. Mary followed Jesus in life, death, resurrection, and new life. Mary let the teachings and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth guide her, just as we should.

As we gather this morning to celebrate the resurrection, it is tempting to solely focus there, to stay an Easter morning people, perpetually trying not to break the ten commandments and wait for the second coming of Jesus. But that's not simply not what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus tells Mary, "Don't linger here, go into the world that is suffering." He tells her to go into the world and tell them "I am alive." Pope Francis said, "Jesus is the everlasting 'today' of God." The resurrection is God's way of defeating corrupt powers of the world in that day, today, and in every age. By telling Mary not to linger at his tomb, Jesus sends her back into a world that is suffering to bring to that world "the good news."

But what is the good news? Ministers in the United Church of Christ are typically socially active, we preach on social justice issues and are sometimes called too political. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that he didn't preach a social gospel, but *the* Gospel. "The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political, or social?' He said: I feed you. Because the good news to a hungry person is bread. When you are ill, I heal you." Tutu is correct: the good news to a person who is ill is healing. The good news to the refugee is safety. The good news to the tired is rest. The good news to the captive is freedom. The good news to those living through the atrocities of war is peace. We, like Mary, are called to be the body of Christ in the world, to be the church, to bring to the world good news by living out the commandments of Jesus.

Being the church is more than going to church. It calls for us to do more than pray and look toward heaven for our eternal salvation. It calls us to work. To join Jesus in his ministry to the least of these. To the poor. To the sick. To the underprivileged. To the weak. To the hopeless. To the stranger. To the neighbor. To the enemy. To the outcast.

Like the blooms of the pink orchid at my house, our tradition is rich and beautiful and brings joy. At the same time, however, it carries with it a weight, one which calls on us to do more than just sit there looking pretty. And you are all gorgeous people, I must say. But like the work of Jesus, ours extends beyond showing up on Sundays, beyond bringing others to Christ via some prayer, beyond our personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus called people of all ages, races, gender expressions, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and abilities into this work. We are called to bring our whole selves, individually and in community, to participate in the work of the Kingdom.

As you depart, I ask you to allow your whole selves to be moved to action, to be moved to act beyond your attendance here with us on Easter Sunday, and to become the church in the world, to be moved to participate in the work of the everlasting 'today' of God,

Amen.