

At the 10:30 am Easter service on April 4, 2010, the Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8 and John 20:1-18.

### **“The Embrace”**

The resurrection stories in the Gospels are rich and wonderful. I went expectantly to the lectionary to see what was earmarked for this year and was happy to see the marvelous story of Mary and Jesus in the garden tomb just read by Debbie.

The story gallops along: Mary finds the tomb empty and notifies the disciples, Peter and the beloved disciple dash to the tomb with Mary in tow and see it empty except for the linen clothes that covered the body of the deceased Jesus. This prompts them to understand and believe that the foretold resurrection has happened. The disciples depart and a weeping Mary remains behind and meets two angels in the tomb. The angels ask her why she’s weeping. She asks them where they have taken Jesus and looks around and sees Jesus who she mistakes for the gardener and he asks her why she is weeping, she asks him where he has carried Jesus and Jesus says “Mary” and Mary recognizes Jesus and embraces him. He tells Mary to tell the disciples that he has risen and will be ascending to God. She dashes off and relays the news to the disciples.

A lot is going on here. This Easter I’m going with Mary’s embrace as a metaphor for life in general and the new life we have in Christ.

Something curious happens in this particular embrace. The text reads: “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary’s embrace of Jesus would make a sensational photograph. It’s a paparazzi moment. The writer captures it and moves on. But in an instant we see something that hasn’t appeared anywhere in the gospels: a woman, Mary, holding on to Jesus. I’m calling it an embrace. It could be a fling of arms around the neck. It could be a hug. We are not told precisely. I’m drawn to this particular frame because of a play Suellen and I saw recently at the Berkeley Repertory Theater called *Concerning Strange Devices from the Distant West*. The strange device in this story is a camera in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Japan.

Playwright Naomi Iizuka was inspired to write the play after coming across photographs of the period and was captivated by them just as I am captivated by the picture of Mary embracing the resurrected Jesus.

Iizuka says: “It was like getting this tantalizing peek into this magical, faraway world. They were these extraordinary pictures of geisha and samurai, but also beggars, condemned criminals, street vendors and little children working in rice fields. As I kept looking, I began to wonder about the people in these photographs.

“I think like pretty much everyone, I wonder about people I see in photographs, particularly people I don’t know. I wonder about their lives after the photograph was taken.

“I guess part of it is just the mystery of their lives and speculating about that. Also, with the 19th-century photographs, everybody in them is dead, and I think about that, too. There’s something about being able to see these strangers frozen in this moment in time that brings up a mix of emotions for me—curiosity, empathy, anxiety, wonder—and I wanted to explore that further.”

This is a marvelous statement on interpretation of a photograph or a gospel text. For the Christian everybody in the Bible is dead except for Jesus. It is true he died but the point of the story is that he came back to life and the person we see in the picture is alive in a mysterious bodily form and later in an ascended, purely spiritual form.

Mary is excited to suddenly encounter Jesus and naturally reaches out to him. Does she want to hold on to the last remnants of life? We don’t know. Jesus acknowledges the embrace in a backhanded way: “Don’t hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended... The “not yet” implies that embracing will come on a different level.

The metaphor of embrace is wonderful. French poet, Jacques Prévert, writes: “Millions and millions of years would still not give me half enough time to describe that tiny instant of all eternity when you put your arms around me and I put my arms around you.”

This in itself is an expression of the resurrection. It’s almost as simple as that: To affirm again and again that the embrace in the resurrection is always an embrace of love and life – the life that overcomes despair, pain, anguish, fear and so on. To embrace the resurrected, ascended Jesus is to embrace all that he was on earth (that’s the meaning of bodily resurrection – that all he was on earth continued after his death) which means when we embrace the resurrected Jesus we embrace his love, peace, justice, ability to heal and compassion.

We embrace a trust that significant, meaningful life will continue after death as Pearl S. Buck wrote: Just as we trusted loving arms to receive us when we came into this world we now trust there will be loving arms to receive us after we die.

The resurrected, ascended Jesus turns and embraces us.

He embraces (with joy and tears) the people in Iizuka’s pictures geisha, samurai, beggars, condemned criminals, street vendors and little children working in rice fields. He embraces disciples, bankers, realtors and plumbers, the poor on our streets, carpenters, architects, lawyers and people on both sides of conflicts in Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Afghanistan.

In the resurrection Jesus embraces human mistakes and transforms them into new life. He meets us in our brokenness, moments of despair and discouragement and promises to heal. There’s restoration in the resurrection.

One of the dictionary definitions of “embrace” is to “take up willingly or eagerly,” such as embracing a social cause. There are many causes that need the life of Christ. The crucified Christ embraces our crucified earth and resurrected Christ embraces its healing. He calls us to do likewise. It’s not too late to heal our fragile planet.

Another definition of “embrace” is “to avail oneself of.” Thus, author Henry James stated: “I only regret, in my chilled age, certain occasions and possibilities I didn’t embrace.” We are here to today to avail ourselves of all that God provides for us in the resurrection.

I’m grateful that Mary embraced the resurrected Jesus. It’s a beautiful picture. We do well to emulate it. Jesus did in short order and whenever we do in safe, sensitive and kind ways we affirm God’s love, life and hope for all in our beautiful and mixed up world. Amen.