

Easter Sunday sermon, 17th April 2022, St. Andrew's on the Terrace

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

In 2016 I travelled to Tuvalu in my capacity as Pacific Regional Secretary for the Council for World Mission. I was picked up at the airport by a man on a scooter, then being asked within half an hour whether I wanted to go on 5 day sailing trip around Tuvalu with the president of Ekalesia Kerisiano Tuvalu EKT. And then discovering during those 5 days that there was no drinking water just Fanta. I had a water bottle and had to make it last for 5 days for just taking my pills. We were invited to Motufoua high school to commemorate the 16th anniversary of the death of the matron and pupils who were killed in a dormitory fire and given that it was going to be conducted in the Tuvaluan language I was looking forward to just being a participant. However, walking between the auditorium and the class room the president of the EKT taps me on the shoulder and says, "You preach". I didn't get a choice, this was to be an honour and a privilege even though it was at a moment's notice. Fortunately, I rose to the occasion and was able to produce a sermon out of the top of my head. My dad always told me to be prepared for everything, having a sermon on hand is like carrying a spare set of batteries in case you run out. This opportunity I had to preach at Motufouua high school, the grief the mothers were feeling after 16 years since the death of their daughters in the school fire. How raw their grief was even after 16 years.

That's how it was for the women who went to the tomb that Easter morning to anoint Jesus body with oils, their grief was still so raw, and they went expecting to find his body in the tomb, but on arrival were shocked to find that the tomb

was empty, and the body of Jesus was no longer there. Where have you taken him Mary asked? She asked thinking that he had been moved somewhere else, she didn't expect that he might have risen from the dead.

These women had witnessed the awfulness of Good Friday. These women saw Jesus' body after it was flogged and beaten. They saw Jesus carry the cross to the Golgotha, the place of the skull. At the place of the skull, they saw the nails hammered through his wrists by the soldiers. They heard the taunting by the crowds. They listened to Jesus' last words. They watched his body as it breathed its last and died. These women saw it all, close, huddled together for strength. It was awful, horrible, gut-wrenching. These women then watched Jesus' body as it was taken down from the cross. Then they followed at a distance to see where Jesus was buried. It was Friday late afternoon, and the Sabbath rules dictated that they had to go home.

These women were last at the cross; now they are first at Jesus' tomb. The news of the empty tomb fills them with "terror and amazement." How can anyone take in such amazing, alarming news? But that is what we all hope and pray for when we are confronted with the reality of impending death when someone we love becomes terminally ill or has a terrible accident and is on life support. If only a miracle could happen, if only they could be made well, if only I could swap places with them and give them my life. Many of us have been there, I wonder what they would look like today if they had lived...?

What was it like for Mary? After surviving the unthinkable horror of that Friday, on the first day of the week in the early morning darkness, she was dealt the crowning blow, one more unfathomable event in the long string of atrocities. The stone was rolled away; the tomb was empty; the body was gone.

She ran back with the news: They have taken Jesus out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him. The helplessness opened the floodgate of tears. There was nothing she could do. They have taken him away, and I don't know where. It was more than she could bear. Mary felt helpless, hopeless.

"Why are you weeping?" the gardener asked. Mary might well have asked the gardener, "Why not? If you're not weeping, you haven't been paying attention." Don't you read the papers, listen to the radio, watch the evening news? Haven't you noticed?

According to Marcus Borg, did Paul believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead? Absolutely. He had experienced Jesus after his death. Did he say, "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain?" (I Cor. 15.14). Yes.

But did he think of the resurrection of Jesus as physical? That is much less clear. His experience of Jesus after his death was not only a few years after what Acts narrates as the Ascension" of Jesus but also a "vision." And near the end of I Corinthians 15, he explicitly says that the resurrection "body" is not a "physical" body but a "spiritual" body, a "glorified" body. What that means is not transparently clear, but, as Paul says, it is not a flesh and blood body.

Easter is about God saying "yes" to Jesus and what he was passionate about.

God was the central reality of his life and the realm of God was the center of his message. The realm of God was not about heaven, not about life after death, but about the transformation of life on earth, as the Lord's Prayer affirms. It is not about "Take us to heaven when we die," but about "Your kingdom come on earth" - as already in heaven. The kingdom of God on earth

was about God's passion - and Jesus's passion - for the transformation of "this world": the humanly created world of injustice and violence into a world of justice and nonviolence.

That's why the powers that ruled the world of Jesus killed him. They were not unknowingly doing the will of God by playing their part in God's plan of salvation to provide a sinless sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world. No. They killed him because he was a radical critic of the way they had put the world together and he was attracting a following. So they snuffed him out.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus they were so full of grief that when Jesus came alongside to join them they did not recognize him. Are you the only one in the whole of Jerusalem who doesn't know what went on? And so they began telling Jesus all that they knew. Even when they reached the end of the road they still did not recognize Jesus, but they asked him to join them for supper and so Jesus obliged. It was only when Jesus broke bread with them during the meal that their eyes were opened and they finally realized that they had been walking with Jesus all the time and yet they did not know it. Did you not feel the burning in your hearts as he broke the bread? By the time they came to the realization, Jesus had left them.

Our grief takes many forms, we grieve for the death of loved ones, we grieve for our pets when they die, we grieve for our marriages and relationships when they are over, we grieve for our jobs when we lose them, we grieve for our houses when the bank seizes them, and we have a mortgagee sale. We grieve for relationships lost with friends and family when unresolved conflict becomes the poison that keeps people apart. When you're held captive to the economic recession which seems to be consuming our everyday existence. We are caught

by redundancies, unemployment, as well as consumerism, limited choices and options.

Back then, Jesus had dared them to imagine a different world, a world where masters wash servants' feet; and the winner is the one who comes in last. A world where, instead of survival of the fittest, wolves and lambs were sitting side-by-side at the table, and homelessness was unheard of.

At the end of the story for today, Mary Magdalene was no longer weeping, sobbing, crying. By the end of the story for today's gospel lesson, Mary Magdalene was convinced that the gardener was Jesus. And because she had seen him that affected her tears and crying. And Mary went and told the disciples that she had seen him. Mary Magdalene was no longer weeping.

Instead of tears there was triumph in her voice. Instead of sorrow, there were signs of relief.

The gospel of Easter day triumphs over our feelings of deepest loss and sorrow. It is not that our human feelings go away, but that the truth of the Easter gospel is stronger than our feelings of sadness.

Mary realized she was not helpless. There was something she could do. She moved from weeping to witnessing. Mary discovered new purpose, new possibility.

The hope of Easter day is that this world is not just where Jesus died-this world is where Jesus lives! we have been set free to live as well. Sometimes that is hard to believe. Some days it is hard to see with eyes of faith. That is why we need the church, so that in those times when our sight is blinded by tears, we

can hold on to one another's faith. That is why we need the meal we call The Eucharist. The sacraments might seem like child's play to the world. Eating bits of bread, drinking sips of juice. But when we look with eyes of faith, when we listen with ears of hope, in this bread broken, this cup poured, we discover anew Mary's good news: When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we dare to imagine a different world, a world not imprisoned by the powers of death, but set free, set free for love, justice, peace.

This is a day to celebrate, to share the victory feast of our God! We have been set free! So even though the tears may be streaming down our cheeks at the atrocities of this world, we can get up from the table and follow Christ's way of justice and peace for all humanity. Alleluia! Amen.