

Coming Home
March 27, 2016
Luke 24:1-12, 1 John 4:7-12

Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed!

These words of greeting are our core story as Christians. They define us and shape who we are. Yet it is a challenging task to let them sink in. It's a challenging task to let the Easter story sink in. It is challenging in part because there are so many competing stories out there, so many competing stories that want to get our attention and tell us who we are and what life is about.

You probably come here this morning carrying some defining stories—

- stories that come from what your parents or teachers or classmates told you about yourself and the world...
- stories that say your value comes from how cool you are or how smart you are or how healthy you are in body or mind...
- stories that tell you the world is a scary place and you better do all you can to get by...
- stories that tell you you have something to prove, that you have a lot to lose...

I know I carry some of those stories inside of me.

But our job as a church community is to believe another story, to live another story, and that is the Easter story. It's a story that seems unbelievable and crazy even but one that has the power to transform us, reorient us, and show us another vision for what it means to be human than what we so often see and experience.

Now a lot of the stories we carry are ones we heard as children, and some of these stories have scarred us inside. Others of these stories that we heard as children, stories that adults tell children, are good ones to carry around and let shape us. The book we read in our children's time, *Where the Wild Things Are*, seems to me to be one of the good ones. It is a story that tells us something about what we know collectively to be true. And in it are the workings of the Easter story.

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, as we just heard, a little boy named Max is sent to his room after he dresses up in his wolf costume and causes havoc in the house. The implication is that he falls asleep and has a dream. In this dream of his, he encounters wild things, fierce things. He knows that he himself is a wild thing, and so he deals with these wild things by making himself their king. He goes on adventures with them. He is free and untamed with them. And he is alone with his wild things.

This story says a lot about what we know to be true. Like Max, we too have wild things. Who each one of us is includes messy things, includes lonely things, includes stubborn and angry and jealous things. And the world outside is also full of wild things, of

threatening things, sometimes downright terrifying things, as we know too well after what we've seen happening in around the world this week in Brussels, in the Middle East, in parts of Africa.

Sometimes these wild things, the wild things within and the wild things without, pull us up into our private rooms, up away from the people who know us best and love us best. In the face of them, we can try to take control. We can try to protect ourselves. So we try to hide.

It's a kind of hiding that has been going on since the very beginning, since Adam and Eve first hid from God in the Garden of Eden. We see our wildness (and the wildness of the world), and we pull back, we cover up, we hide behind the cool shade of the trees of the garden where it feels dark and protected.

We go into our closed rooms where the complexity of human relationships seems a little easier to manage,

into our closed rooms where we hope to change ourselves into whatever we think is more acceptable than we already are,

into our closed rooms where we strain for self-sufficiency or security or success so that we might feel some greater measure of control or competence in our world.

There are many strategies, many ways we hide, probably as many as there are people in this room.

But along with speaking to how we can hide in fear, Maurice Sendak's popular story also speaks to our longing for good news, the good news that Easter is all about – that's the good news that just as Jesus was not abandoned to the cross, we are not abandoned to fear of wild things;

that just as Jesus was not abandoned in his tomb, we are not abandoned in our hiding places.

Our fear and our tombs and our hiding places are not actually who we are.

PAUSE ... After awhile Max becomes aware that there is a person who loves him most, that he misses this one who loves him most, and he decides to take a break from the wild things and go back. He finds that there is warm food is waiting for him. He finds that he is not loved any less. The one who loves him most is waiting there.

And for Adam and Eve and for you and for me, the one who loves us most, the Lord who fashions our very hearts, that Loving One is waiting for us, offering us spiritual food that sustains. This One knows our wild things, because he entered into our world and our lives and met them too. That's where the Easter story begins. Our passage this morning from 1 John 4 says, "This is love: not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God's Son for us as the atoning sacrifice for our sins." We are not abandoned in our hiding places. God comes.

God comes as Jesus into our world of wild things, wild things within and wild things without. God is not satisfied looking down and seeing us from afar, looking across the garden as we scramble behind the trees. No, God who loves us most comes and sees

and hears and feels the fur and the teeth of the wild things—all through Holy Week we remembered and reenacted Jesus' experiences of human pain, betrayal, and loss. God comes to us and meets wild things and dies on a cross and is placed in a tomb, a closed up room. We spent Holy Week remembering and re-experiencing that path.

And then we get to Easter, when the tomb ends up empty, when he is not there. He is not there not because his body was stolen or because he really didn't die at all; he is not there because he has risen! The tomb is empty because the fur and teeth of the wild things, the pain and betrayal and loss of human life are not the final word. The cross is not the final word. The awful violence that has happened in our world this week—and that happens every week, whether it makes the news or not—this violence is not the final word. No, the final word is hope. The final word is homecoming. The final word is resurrection.

That's what Easter is about for Peter in our Gospel reading this morning. Peter is that complicated disciple who tried to convince Jesus that he didn't have to die, who didn't want Jesus to wash his feet, who promised he would never betray him, who did betray him three times. None of those plot lines are the final word for Peter.

This morning, whatever wild things are romping and wrestling in his heart, Peter hears the women say that Jesus has risen from the tomb. Unlike the others who take these words as silliness, as idle tales, as foolish hope, Peter runs to the tomb, finds it empty, and then—perhaps like Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*—then he returns home amazed. He comes home, amazed. The final word for Peter is not his own betrayal of Jesus, is not his fear, is not his disbelief. The final word for Peter is hope. The final word is homecoming. The final word is resurrection.

This is the Easter story. This is the Easter story that we come together to celebrate this morning with beautiful music and flowers and new clothes. It is the story that shapes who we are, that defines who we are as Christian community. Whatever other stories we've been told about ourselves, what other messages we hear on a day to day basis, Christianity claims that this Easter story is the core story that tells us our core truth. ... Which is that love is the root of our existence. Love is the root of our existence. We are beloved by God, and love is the strongest force there is, so strong that it couldn't be nailed down and destroyed on a cross.

Yes, the world can be wild, we can be wild, but we are beloved more than we can fully understand. In spite of our hiding, in spite of our fear, in spite of the sin that separates us from other people, in spite of our sense of needing to be somehow different or better to be loved in our world and to make a contribution to it, in spite of all of that, this God of love comes to us in Jesus to show us who we are, to show us our Belovedness. In coming to us, God draws us to Godself, and there we know who we really are. God draws us home, which is the journey of a lifetime.

And we don't do it alone. We don't do it just for ourselves. We have a sacred task of doing it together. I want to share a little piece of my own story here. I didn't grow up

going to church. I didn't know what church was all about, but I thought it had something to do with refusing to learn about evolution in biology class and never having any questions about God, only answers. So instead of finding out about God in church, I spent a lot of time up in my room with the door closed trying to find some kind of meaning on my own. It gave me the illusion that spirituality was only a private thing, that I could hold myself up on my own and not need anyone else.

But then during a difficult situation during college, I found myself stumbling into church – or more likely, God pulled me to church – first to a string of churches and then eventually to the United Methodist Church in particular. What I found there was a community of people who took me as I was, with all of my questions, all of my quirks, all of my pains, all of my hopes. In this kind of space I could stop hiding. In this kind of space God became visible. “No one has ever seen God,” our Scripture says, “but if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.” God’s love is made known in us.

Love was real for Max in the context of his family, his home, where he was known and loved as his whole self. Love was and is real for me in the church community that showed me and keeps showing me—showing us—who God is and who we are. It doesn't necessarily fix all that is broken, but it means God is with us anyway. We are known and loved here, whatever wild things we have wrestling around inside of us. God's love lives in us in our community, through all its ups and downs, all of its joy and trouble.

Our call together is to share the good news that each and every human being is loved by God, that no matter what wild things someone has known or been or done, God has a home for them. God has a place at the table for them, for you, for me. At FLUMC we are living this out literally again as spring begins with our community garden that helps feed people who don't often get to eat fresh vegetables.

And spiritually, people are hungry everywhere... which means we have an urgent and important story to share, a urgent and important message to live, one that is stronger than the self-defeating, humanity-defeating stories that we run into in our culture, our jobs and schools, our world.

Wherever we come from,
whatever inner and outer things we are wrestling with,
whatever loss, suffering, or fear we have known,

The final word for us too is hope.
The final word for us too is homecoming.
The final word for us too is resurrection.

That's what Peter learned on Easter morning.
On Easter morning, Peter went home amazed.
May we also go home amazed.

May we proclaim this Easter message with our whole being,
wild things and all.
And may we be strengthened by the communion meal that is waiting for us to share
together as a community that lives out this story.

Amen.