

AN ALLELUIA FROM HEAD TO TOE

EASTER SUNDAY

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I don't like surprises. I like to know what's happening.

On the evening of my 17th birthday, my boyfriend picked me up from work.

I worked at Ponderosa Steak House. They worked hard to keep it very clean,

but at the end of the day, it was a greasy mess, and so was everyone who worked in it.

I'd worked an afternoon shift on my birthday so I could have the evening off

and my boyfriend had promised me a nice date. That was what I expected.

I wanted to change out of my uniform first, of course, so he picked me up and we went to my home.

I went to bolt upstairs for a quick shower and to change into something normal.

But, no, Mom calls me into the family room "for a sec."

While standing there in all my greasy Ponderosa glory,

a red gingham shirt, black mini-skort, black cowgirl hat and white knee highs,

a dozen of my classmates popped up: SURPRISE!

NO! This was NOT what I expected!

Self-absorbed and out of control, I couldn't see what I didn't expect:

friends who actually wanted to be with me, stupid cowgirl hat and all.

I saw only a dozen obstacles who were upsetting my plans to change clothes.

They were glad to be there, I was miserable.

Finally, my bestie, Debbie Johnson, looked at me and brought me into the moment.

"Becky!" she says; then, "lighten up, it's a party! we're here to have fun."

My self-absorption shattered. A party. Hey! A party! with friends!

So, let's dance! *Let's go surfin' now, everybody's learnin' how...*

My initial negative reaction to surprise makes me a pretty typical human:

humans like to be in control, to get what we expect, especially in our religion.

Folks in all religions often have pretty clear notions about what should happen,

they want what they want, and expectations that had better be met.

No surprises, please! If something really different goes down, then, Whoa, Nellie! Fur is gonna fly.

No surprises, please! If we love our rock 'n roll church,

then someone wheels in an organ and starts with the JS Bach without a lick of PDQ in it,

fur is gonna fly.

No surprises, please! If we love our smells 'n bells church, then someone puts up nifty screens,

and the pastor comes in wearing jeans and arms full of tattoos, fur is gonna fly.

Indeed, surprises have been a problem for the church since the very first Easter Sunday.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, where she expects to find a dead man, Jesus.

This makes all kinds of sense, because tombs are where one keeps dead people.

Jesus' tomb is open. The tomb is empty. That's a bad surprise!

Mary wants her dead Jesus, she wants him now, so the fur flies.

Off she goes to get reinforcements to help her find the dead man she expects.

Peter comes and looks for a dead Jesus. Doesn't find him.

John looks for a dead Jesus and doesn't find him.

John at least has faith that the empty tomb means *something*, what with the head linen neatly folded.

Grave robbers (except maybe ones who admire Martha Stewart) don't fold linens.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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But it's all pretty confusing, they don't understand, so the two men leave.

Mary stays, still looking for a dead Jesus.

She sees angels in the tomb, but that doesn't seem to phase her in the least.

The angels ask what Mary must have thought was one of the stupidest questions anyone ever asked someone visiting a cemetery: "Why are you crying?"

Right. My world has crumbled and you want me to what, dance?

Mary, however, is so intent on her search she doesn't have time for sarcasm.

She just wants some help finding her dead Jesus.

She does not expect the dead man to be outside the tomb walking around,

so when she does see someone outside the tomb walking around,

she very logically assumes it's NOT the dead man she's expecting to find.

The stupid question is asked again: "Why are you crying?"

but then a much more appropriate question: "Who are you looking for?"

Since dead men don't leave tombs on their own, her razor-sharp intellect assumes someone took him, and she asks this NOT-dead man if he's carried her dead Lord away.

Self-absorbed and out of control, she can't see what she doesn't expect: the Lord.

The Lord of the Kingdom where no one hears the sound of weeping or crying,

where nothing is hurt or destroyed. She saw only an obstacle to her plans to do the normal thing:

get Jesus ready for burial. Jesus was alive, and she was miserable.

To bring her into the moment, Jesus calls his friend by her name: "Mary!"

Mary's self-absorption shatters. Her grief pivots straight to joy.

Brought into the present, she understands: Love wins! Death couldn't stop God!

She becomes, as one saint put it, *An alleluia from head to toe.*¹ "Rabbouni!" she exclaims.

Teacher! Friend! Lord! She wants to hang on to that moment, of course.

But, no, this surprise is too explosive to hang on to! Things are moving fast.

They both have work to do. Jesus has to go back to where he came from,

to lift his human experience, every step in his life among humanity,

every throb of suffering in his betrayal and crucifixion,

every moment of isolation in the sealed tomb,

lift it up into the heart of his Father and our Father, his God and our God.

Jesus had work for her to do, too. Mary was the one who had to go, GO!

Go and tell the others what she'd seen, what she'd heard, and surprise them, too.

I can easily imagine her alleluia toes dancing from the garden.

Jesus is still doing his work of that day, still filling creation with grace and truth.

The church is also still doing the work Mary started.

The church is not a museum that captures the past and keeps it secure,

the church is a place where people do Mary's work of GOING,

not just to describe the Reign of God bye and bye, pie in the sky, after we die,

but, following Jesus and living in the Resurrection's surprising, uncontrollable truth,

the church proclaims that Love Wins, and not even death can stop God

from bringing creation into heaven.

The destruction of any church building is a terrible sorrow,

but whether that building is Notre Dame in Paris or St. Mary Baptist Church,

Greater Union Baptist Church, or Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, all in Louisiana,

the destruction of a building cannot stop God's people from doing the work Jesus gave Mary to do:

GO!

Proclaim it! The Reign of God is already true, the party has already started.

¹ This has been attributed to both St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas. Take your pick.

We just need to know where to look for it and work for it!

And there's the challenge, because there's a real possibility
that the Reign won't look like what we expect, and we'll miss it.

Jesus gave hints in the Gospels about looking the Reign of God, didn't he?

If we spend our days looking for a grain of sand,
we'll miss the perfect pearl that has transformed that grain.

If we spend our days looking for a teensy seed,
we'll miss the great mustard plant that seed became;

If we look for tadpoles and caterpillars,
we'll never find the leaping frog or the majestic butterfly;

if we're looking for the corpse, we'll never find the living God.

Where do we look for the Reign of God?

As we know from the Resurrection, the Kingdom of heaven is full of surprises,
Like a brass band in a library, a Pepsi in a Coke machine, a woman in the pulpit,
the signs of the Reign of God usually won't fit within our everyday, normal expectations,
where WE are the ones in control.

To find the Reign of God, we need to unwrap ourselves from our self-absorption,
and look at what's right in front of us; to see, as Mary saw Jesus,
how the prophets' promises are coming true right here and right now.

Where are people making sure that babies – and their mothers –
aren't dying from lack of food, shelter, and water? You can see the Reign of God right there.

Where are people making sure old folks live out their days in secure, safe homes?

You can see the Reign of God right there.

Where are people caring that the homeless find a house, the hungry find food?

You can see the Reign of God right there.

Where do people get a living wage for their handiwork?

Where do children wake up to hope instead of horrors?

You can see the Reign of God right there.

Wherever, however, people wage peace, you can see the Reign of God right there.

But, the best, most unexpected place to look for the Reign of God is:

SURPRISE! it's in the mirror. Can we see what's right before us?

Yes, God starts it all by calling us, each of us, by name, to bring us into the moment, into the Reign.

My legal first name is Sylvia. I'm named after my wonderful great aunt,
I love her and I'm proud to have her name, but as you know, I'm called Becky.

That's from my middle name – been called Becky since I came home
from Orange County Memorial Hospital outside Orlando in 1954.

When I have surgery or a procedure and have to have general anesthesia,

I have to tell the medical team that's been calling me "Sylvia" for an hour,
that if they want me ever to come out of the anesthesia,

they're going to have to call me "Becky," the name my friends use.

Calling me "Sylvia" won't bring me out of the fog.

When God calls our names, he is calling us, God's friends, out of the anesthetic fog
of sorrow, grief, and the self-absorption of our everyday, normal, controlled, no-surprises-please lives
and into that place where creation comes in touch with heaven.

God calls us, God's friends, by name, just like Jesus called Mary,
and has Kingdom work for each of us, too, but also to lighten up, because there's a party going on.

God calls us by name to come out of the fog to, into the moment, to be an alleluia from head to toe,
and then go out, dancing out on alleluia toes with an alleluia mouth
into our own neighborhoods and cities to find the Reign of God.

We just need to make sure we don't search for it only among people who are just like us, but also in those who are different, that confuse us, that we can't stand or understand, because, as we've seen, like the Resurrection, the Reign of God shows up where we don't expect it in this moment, in every moment, but it all begins because God has already put the Reign inside each of us, giving himself to us, abiding in us. So

Please stand.

GO! Proclaim it with your lives: Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

COLLECT OF THE DAY

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

ISAIAH 65:17–25

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won't be remembered; they won't come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating, because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy and her people as a source of gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people. No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again. No more will babies live only a few days, or the old fail to live out their days. The one who dies at a hundred will be like a young person, and the one falling short of a hundred will seem cursed. They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They won't build for others to live in, nor plant for others to eat. Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people; my chosen will make full use of their handiwork. They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors, because they will be people blessed by the Lord, they along with their descendants. Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear. Wolf and lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but the snake—its food will be dust. They won't hurt or destroy at any place on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

Let Israel now proclaim, "His mercy endures for ever."

The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

There is a sound of exultation and victory in the tents of the righteous:

"The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! the right hand of the Lord is exalted!
the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!"

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.

The Lord has punished me sorely, but he did not hand me over to death.

Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.

"This is the gate of the Lord; he who is righteous may enter."

I will give thanks to you, for you answered me and have become my salvation.

The same stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:19–26

If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest of those who have died. Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came through one too. In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ. Each event will happen in the right order: Christ, the first crop of the harvest, then those who belong to Christ at his coming, and then the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he brings every form of rule, every authority and power to an end. It is necessary for him to rule until he puts all enemies under his feet. Death is the last enemy to be brought to an end.

JOHN 20:1–18

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

SERMON HYMN: *Woman, Weeping in the Garden*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.