

Unpredictable Resurrection: *John 19:40-20:18*

Norwalk Christian Church, March 27, 2016, Easter Sunday, Year C

Happy Easter! Although you wouldn't know it, walking outside. We moved the egg hunt indoors this morning, because it's too cold. The calendar says it's been Spring for exactly one week, but outside it still feels like winter. Yet snowbirds are returning. The tulips and daffodils are beginning to come up. Robins are starting their nests.

A few weeks ago, it actually felt like Spring, though it was still winter. I began the spring cleanup work, gathering up the leaves that had been left over the winter, pulling out some of the dead growth I hadn't cleared in...well, ever. I was ready for Spring to begin.

And then, well, on the second day of Spring the Weather Channel named another Winter Storm, Selene, which has all week dumped snow and rain, blowing in below average temperatures throughout the Midwest. I've heard more than a few of you complaining about this Spring cold snap, worried it might kill your early budding plants and bushes.

The calendar says it's Spring. The calendar says it's Easter. But it doesn't feel like Easter.

If you're like me, you never know when Easter is going to happen each year. The date is always changing. For around 17 hundred years, Christian Churches in the West have set their observance of Easter, not by the date on the calendar, but by, of all things, the phases of the moon.

It all began in AD 325, at the Council of Nicea. There church leaders in the West decided a bunch of stuff, including when Easter would happen. There was diversity around the church, and they wanted uniformity. So, they thought they'd make it easy. Let's celebrate the resurrection of our Lord every year on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox. Because...that makes sense...

Because of that, the day of Easter moves all over the Spring calendar, potentially arriving as early as March 22nd and as late as April 25th. Couple that unpredictable date with unpredictable Iowa weather, and you never know if you're going to be wearing shorts or a parka for the annual Church Easter egg hunt.

That's why the the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, wants a fixed date for Easter. He is the head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, headquartered in England, and he made international news when he announced earlier this year that he was joining the Pope, as well as the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, to begin to plan a unified, fixed date for Easter among the world's churches.

Easier said than done. If you thought our lunar-determined Easter date makes things difficult, it's only made more complicated by the fact that Orthodox churches around the

world follow a different method for dating Easter. So, every year, there are two Christian Easters! You never know when Easter will happen.

If Archbishop Welby gets his way, all worldwide Christians will celebrate Easter on the 2nd Sunday of April--every year. And he predicts that a unified date will happen within 5-10 years.

I'm doubtful it will happen. I mean, Christians agreeing on things?? But it would be nice, knowing when Easter would come--every year. No egg hunts when it's 37 degrees. No surprises when your March birthday falls on Easter. The flowers would always be in bloom. It would be nice.

After all, Christmas has a fixed date: Christ will be born on December 25th, every year. You can predict it. You can plan on it. But not Easter, no. It's hard to nail down, which may suggest that *rebirth* is even more unpredictable than birth.

What is predictable, however, is that *whenever* Easter falls, the church will be fuller than normal, as we show up, regardless of the date on the calendar or the temperature outside, to hear again the Easter Story.

The story, in the Gospel of John, begins in chapter 20, with Mary Magdalene coming early morning, "to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses."

But you don't know it's a garden, unless you read the ending of chapter 19. Jesus has died, and because of the date on the calendar, Passover, they removed his body from the cross quickly. A man named Joseph of Arimathea asks permission to remove Jesus' body. Then he, along with Nicodemus, wrap up the corpse of Jesus in perfume and linen cloths, and lay his body in a new tomb...in a garden.

A garden.

Have you ever noticed that detail? Jesus' body was laid to rest in a garden.

I'll be honest with you, before moving to Iowa, I didn't know much about gardens. And, really, I still don't. We attempted our first garden last year, and it was utter chaos. The rows were too close. We planted it all late in the season, and some things never came up. The kids really wanted pumpkins, so we thought--why not, right? The vine went everywhere, tearing down tomato plants, climbing hedges. It was chaos. Unpredictable.

But what garden isn't? Regardless of your skill at gardening, so much depends on things out of your control, on soil quality, and how cold the winter was, and when Spring temperatures actually arrive--and stay, and if you got enough rain but not too much. You can do your best, but at the end of the day, it's ultimately out of your control. So you just plant, you tend and you wait and see what happens.

A garden. That's where Joseph and Nicodemus hastily place Jesus' corpse on Good Friday. They plant his body in a garden.

It's the next day, the first day of the week, when Mary Magdalene shows up in the garden to pay her final respects. She comes expecting a memorial garden, but...well...we know the rest of the story.

The stone of the tomb has been rolled away. She runs and tells Jesus' disciples, and two of them come to see it for themselves. Not only has the stone been moved, but the tomb is empty--nothing but the shell of grave clothes lying inside. The two disciples return home, perplexed by it all.

But not Mary. Mary stays...and waits. She goes back to the tomb, and that's when she bends over to look inside one more time. This time, it's no longer empty. There, where Jesus' body had been laid, are two angels. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask her. A strange question for someone in a memorial garden. "They've taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him," she says.

And then she sees a man. He asks the same question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" She figures the man is the gardener. "If you've taken him!" she says, "please tell me where he is." And that's when the man says her name, Mary, and she knows.

It doesn't make sense. She's unprepared. She never could've predicted it. But she knows.

She knows she's no longer in a memorial garden. No, this is an Easter garden. And when you show up in an Easter garden, you never know what to expect. Christ has risen.

I'll be honest...it'd be nice to have a fixed date for Easter. It'd be nice to schedule resurrection. Mark it on your calendar--this will be the day of rebirth.

As it is, this Easter business is much like the mud season we read about earlier. "The grass is intensely green next to patches of lingering snow. This is the time between--neither winter, or spring."

On any given day, there are signs of death and new life. Winter and Spring, all mixed up together. It's Easter, but it doesn't always feel like it.

We want to control and schedule life. Tell me what season it is, and I'll plan appropriately. But how can you make plans in this in-between season?

If Mary had known that today was Easter, she would've shown up, expecting the stone to be rolled away. She would've looked for Jesus on the face of everyone she met.

But this is the mud season. You never know what will happen. The surface looks dead, but underneath, life is teeming, just waiting to poke through the mud. There's a seed waiting to grow, a bulb waiting to bloom. You can't put the blooming date on the calendar. But it will happen. It always does.

You can't schedule resurrection.

Fixed date or moveable date, you never know when Easter will come. It moves around the calendar, showing up in the most unexpected and unpredictable places.

Easter may fall as early as a positive pregnancy test, or as late as new love after a messy divorce. It may surprise you in a moment of joy after a prolonged season of grief, or in the warmth of a hug from a friend in a cold season of uncertainty. Easter may arrive right after you gave up hope, or right before you moved on for good.

You may wait years for Easter to come, or only moments. You may see a new world emerge just when you thought the old world of pain and violence was winning the day. It may surprise you. It may overwhelm you. Easter may arrive and make you believe again, and it may make you doubt everything you've ever thought was true.

The whole world is caught up in this great mud season, the inbetween times of death and new life. Yet since the first time Easter made it's appearance on the calendar to Mary in that Garden so long ago, one thing is sure. No matter what the world may look like on the surface, underneath it is teeming with life, waiting to be reborn.

You can't predict or schedule Easter, but you can set your life to it's rhythm. At any time of the year, in any--and every--situation, when you least expect it, haven't planned for it, and think it to be impossible, resurrection comes.

So open your eyes! Wake up in the morning looking for resurrection! Arrive in the garden expecting the risen Christ! Put it on your calendar every day, because any day--and every day--can be Easter. Any day--and every day--can be *your* day of resurrection.

Christ has risen! Christ has risen, indeed!

And with that announcement of Good News, the whole world is born again.

Anything is possible.

Nothing is hopeless.

And no matter the season or the date on the calendar, every day is Resurrection Day.

May it be so in our lives.

Amen.