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Extreme Makeover

John 20:1-10

The tomb is empty.

It made no sense to the disciples that early morning and still brings us confusion this day. How did this happen? How is it that Jesus was crucified, dead and enclosed in a tomb and then is alive again? Logic cries out for us to figure out all the answers. But the Resurrection of Jesus is the work of God and God alone. Will we ever completely understand? As long as we live on this earth, "Probably not!" There has been confusion about this event throughout time. Welcome to the United Methodist Church where questioning and exploration is encouraged! Confused? No problem unless we allow our confusion to blind our celebration. This is a day for trust, this is a day for rejoicing, this is a day to offer our gratitude to God. For what we know this day is not rational to the human brain, but it is absolute brilliance as Divine intervention. He was dead and now he is alive and well in our midst this morning.

Prayer: Speak through our confusion O God, so that we might hear your voice and celebrate your gift of life. We are your people, your Easter people and we rejoice as your disciples in this life and offer you our gratitude for life beyond this life! Amen.

Reality shows are the rage these days. No need to pay actors; just put together a scenario of one kind or another and voila--you have live television. Depending on the day, you can find "America's Next Top Model", "Project Runway", "Top Chef", "American Idol", "Survivor", or a variety of extreme makeover shows on the television. "Move that Bus" is the slogan of the show that provides a remodeled or even a new house for a family in need. However, there has been another form of the extreme makeover plot that has to do with the contestant's physical change. From head to toe, the contestants go through diet, exercise, dentistry, and cosmetic surgery to achieve their desired physical change. The premise is that when the outside of the person is changed, the inside will be transformed as well. Now, I am not talking about corrective surgery that truly gives a person a new lease on life. I am talking about changing the external that was healthy before surgery, I am talking about "vanity surgery" if you will. When I was a little girl, it made sense to me that every one needed a fairy godmother to make life beautiful. It was true in fairy tales and it seemed to me that it made perfect sense.

There is this obsession in this nation with the external look. Young, thin, great hair, straight and white teeth, perfect bone structure – are just a few of the expectations. After spending years in Los Angeles, it became clear to me that the fairy godmother had been replaced with cosmetic surgery. What Mother Nature did not provide, cosmetic surgery can surely offer. Liposuction, botox, reduction, implants, collagen, face-lifts, eyelid lifts, brow tattoos, etc. etc. etc. And this is not just for women; this is a booming business with men and women as clients.

Our culture is obsessed with our external appearance and the approval of others. We have lost our self-confidence because we are reliant on measuring ourselves by the expectations of others rather than the infinite love of God. It is not an external look of positive self-esteem we so desperately seek, but rather the image of God within us that we so deeply desire. Yet we devote so much of life and invest our understanding of self in the opinion of others.

I read a great story years ago about William Morris. William, better known as “Speedy” was a basketball coach and he spent much of his career coaching men’s basketball at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The story is told that while he was shaving one morning getting ready to go to work, his wife called up to him that Sports Illustrated was on the phone. He was delighted. Finally, he thinks to himself, he is going to get the national recognition he deserves. He tries to hurry the shaving along so that he can run to the phone without shaving cream all over his face. He moves so quickly that he cuts himself and begins to bleed. He grabs a washcloth for the bleeding and decides to forget the shaving cream and get to the phone. Racing out of the bathroom, he trips, loses his balance and falls down the stairs. He is bleeding, he has shaving cream over most of his face and he is limping as he picks up the phone. Ever determined he says, “Sports Illustrated?” The voice on the other end says, “Yes! And for seventy five cents an issue you can get a year’s subscription!”

It is so human and it must be near the truth because he was the one to tell the story. He probably could not believe that he risked face and limb to get to the phone for a telemarketer! When he thought it was an interview with Sports Illustrated, it might have been worth the risk, but when it was a salesperson for the magazine, it seemed ridiculous! I feel confident it caused him to pause to reflect on his understanding of self.

We are consumed by our external appearance and the affirmation of others in this culture! We yearn to be respected at our work and in our community and of course we desire to be loved in our families. But we allow absolute strangers in the media and fashion, in the culture in general to help shape our self-image. Our need for external affirmation can grow to the point that we forget that our true sense of self comes not from the external, but the internal and most importantly the One who is eternal, Jesus Christ. We will go to great lengths to be first, to be the best, to be the fastest or the smartest or the most beautiful without realizing that all of this is fleeting, what ultimately matters is that we are faithful.

When it comes to my life there is no fairy godmother, no cosmetic surgery, and if there is going to be a transformation in my life, it is going to come from deep within.

Retired Bishop John Shelby Spong from the Episcopal tradition has written, “Fundamental change is not a casual occurrence...The journey from density to light involves every aspect of who we are.” Spong speaks of the opaque that we cannot see through and density that we do not understand. He goes on to say, “Only by finding the love within us can we provide the love that can bring change to the world ...transforming the world is accomplished by transforming ourselves. This is a day of transformation. It is not just a day, but an invitation to a lifestyle of grace and of hope.”

Bishop Spong speaks of the Easter power of the Easter event and I agree with him except that he implies that we transform ourselves. Transformation is God's work. Easter is God's work. We could not love ourselves into wholeness. It is a divine act that transforms us. It is in the conquering of life and death and life again that God gives us an eternal relationship with the Divine.

A tomb could not contain the love of God. That love is released into the universe and lives within all of us. Life on the Resurrection side of the cross is an invitation to allow faith to be the foundation for your life and your interactions with others, to bring positive creative energy to your living and to see life as full of faith-filled possibilities rather than just a host of problems. New beginnings are possible anywhere because God is present everywhere. There is no place that God is not. There is no situation that God cannot redeem. It is transformation from the inside out. It is life from the Easter side of the cross and it is God's initiative.

Jesus was laid in the darkness of a tomb, but by God's grace that tomb was filled with light. By God's grace every tomb is filled with light. Easter is not confined to one person, one tomb, or one life. God not only transformed life beyond this life, but in the Resurrection God transformed life here on earth. God has broken into this reality and changed it forever for every one, for every life and every death. This is a cosmic action on God's part. It changes not only our personal lives, but life in the universe. By the power and presence of our Creator God, we live with courage and confidence that all things are being made new.

Theologian Karl Rahner writes of the Resurrection, "he has forever taken the world to himself; he is born anew as a child of this earth. But it is now an earth that is transfigured, an earth that is set free, it is untwisted, an earth that is established forever in him and that is forever redeemed from death and futility. He rose, not to show that he had forsaken the grave of the earth, but to prove that he definitively transformed even this grave of death – into the glorious, immeasurable dwelling of the living God and of the God-filled soul of the Son."

Are we willing to allow God's gift of love this Easter to transform us? Are we willing to invite the living God to the very depth of our soul and welcome God's ways to our living? We do not do the transforming, but we are given the freedom to accept or reject the transformation that God offers. And in accepting we will find that we are ever more Christ-like and ever growing into the person that God envisions. It is when we embrace the gift of the Resurrection life that our own lives become full to overflowing with Divine love.

Again in the words of Rahner, "For his resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of all... One thing, of course, is necessary...to become the blessedness of our existence: he must burst forth from the grave of our hearts. He must rise from the core of our being, where he is as power and promise."

The disciples left confused. They did not understand. They could not make sense of the situation. It was the women who stayed and encountered the risen Lord. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The Resurrection gives us the opportunity to be alive grace-fully right here, right now. Yet, so many who profess to be Christian choose to be the spiritually dead among the grace-fully living. We tend to cling to the backside of the cross rather than embracing

new life on the Resurrection side of the cross. We conclude the Easter celebrations with Alleluias and race back to life unchanged, a dark place of ridicule, judgment, callousness, and self-centeredness. It is a paradox: so many who claim Christ, resist new life.

Every year in December or January, I purchase an amaryllis. The truth is that I wait until January to see if I have received one in December as a Christmas gift. I love everything about an amaryllis. I love the way it transforms from an ugly bulb to long stems of beautiful trumpet-like blooms. Well, there was no amaryllis for Christmas this year, so I purchased one in January and when it arrived it showed no real signs of life. It was ugly!

So, as I do every year, I opened the container holding the bulb, followed the instructions and put the plant on the same table that I put it on last year and I have been waiting patiently for it to bloom. Long, thin green leaves have pushed their way through the bulb. They are healthy and hold a beauty of their own, but there are no blossoms yet. Every day I look for the beginning of a blossom, but all I see are leaves. It occurs to me that this amaryllis is not going to bloom at all. It will be the first one in decades that I can remember that did not burst forth with colorful blooms. Last year, the plant bloomed for weeks and weeks. New stalks with four blooms each just kept appearing. I took pictures because the plant was so amazing!

I wonder what made this year so different. This plant had the same amount of water and sat in the same place as the last one. I nurtured it just like I do every year, and yet no blooms. Something deep inside that bulb did not embrace the nourishment it was given.

We are all the beneficiaries of the Easter miracle. Christ is risen! That truth is gift to us all. We all have the opportunity to be blessed by this loving action of God, yet some of us flourish in that love and others resist. Some of us are able to push through the harsh realities of this world and embody the love and grace that God has showered upon us. Some of us, even though confused by God's ways, will still choose to live into God's gift and be blessed by it. Personally, I want to be like the beautiful amaryllis of last year, but I worry that my life is more representative of the plant I continue to watch this year.

The transformation we seek is from the inside out. You and I have certainly been given all we will ever need to allow God's love to bloom from within us. That love is at the core of our being and as Rahner declares, for Christ to become our blessedness, our hope, our joy, our life, we must embrace God's love from the depths of our hearts and the core of our being. My prayer for all of us is that the Easter reality gives us pause to consider our lives and how we might live as an offering of gratitude and blessing to the One who has made life itself possible.

We are Easter people. We are called to live on the Resurrection side of the cross where God reigns and love abounds. We are people who understand the love of the cross to change this world and the power of the Resurrection to bring new life. The tomb is empty, the blessing is yours, thanks be to God!