

Easter Homilies
April 4, 2010
Heather Leslie Hammer

Mystery on the Third Day
1 Corinthians 15:51-57

One early Easter morning when our children were little, I went outside to get the Sunday paper. It was cold out, and I hadn't put on my slippers, so I made a quick dash to the driveway, picked up the newspaper, and then as I looked back at the house, I spotted something in the flowerbed. A colored egg, and another, and another—5 eggs, not very well hidden. These were surely for the children to find, so I left them there on the ground. And I came back inside the house, closing the door quietly because no one else was up yet. I put the coffeecake in the oven and set the table with the children's Easter baskets, thinking: Who could have left those eggs in the yard? It was a mystery! —It was years before we learned who the mystery Easter Rabbit was, who came to our house in the dark each Easter morning and left us each a colored egg.

“Listen, I'll tell you a mystery!” That's how Paul begins his summary of the Easter story. He has just written the earliest account of the Resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians. He put in writing how Christ died, was buried and on the third day was raised in accordance with the scriptures of the Jewish bible, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve disciples of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3-5). It was a mystery, a story Paul accepted on faith, yet still it was a mystery.

A “mystery” we could call “a truth not yet fully understood,” “a truth unfolding but not yet completely clear.”

“Listen, I'll tell you a mystery.” Throughout Lent, 40 folks in this church have been meeting weekly in Spirituality Groups (S-Groups), sharing our lives and our faith. I have permission to tell you one of the stories that rose up in one of the conversations. We were sharing on the subject of learning from others' mistakes. One of our people was brave enough to tell how her parents had been virtually absent as she was growing up. Due to her parents' addiction and neglect, this woman had established at a very early age that she didn't want to be like her parents. Somehow she managed to break away from her family and become her own person, a strong, beautiful, and capable person, wife, and mother. When she told our group about her life, it was an incredible story of resurrection. It was the essence of hope and transformation.

There must have been a spark of God in this woman, all along, from when she was a little girl. And that spark, mysteriously, grew and raised her up into a whole new life.

The essence of resurrection starts with a quiet mystery, a tiny spark of hope. Then it grows into a full-blown song of joy: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” But first, “Listen I will tell you a mystery!”

Peter's First Response
Luke 24:1-12

First it was the women who came to the tomb, looking for the body. They were perplexed and then terrified to see angels there. But then when the angels reminded them of Jesus' words, that he would rise on the third day, they went to tell the men....who said it was "an idle tale."

But not Peter! For Peter, it was no "idle tale." Peter had to see for himself. He got up, ran to the tomb, stooped to look inside, saw the empty tomb, and then went home, amazed, not only by what he had seen, but "amazed at what had happened."

He believed the mystery! Somehow, he caught the essence of Easter.

It's not always easy to catch the essence of Easter. There's not a lot of evidence of hope out there, when you listen to the news and contemplate the problems of the world: terrorist bombings in England, new settlements in East Jerusalem causing renewed tension, a war in Afghanistan that never ends, a divided Congress, name-calling, and threats.

Caring people can feel overwhelmed by the needs all around us. We can give to Katrina, send malaria nets to Africa, and assemble health kits for Haiti, —and then pick up a bestseller like *Three Cups of Tea* and feel guilty that we haven't done anything to help build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In Haiti, alone, since the earthquake in January, the devastation is enough to bring you down. How many more newscasts can you take with people reaching for water bottles, digging trenches in the mud between lean-to shelters, and charging through the streets with stolen goods? People are still waiting for plastic sheeting to keep out of the rain, and refugee camps are breeding disease and violence. Even before the earthquake, half of all Haitians lived on \$1 a day, in the poorest country in our hemisphere.

But "listen, I will tell you a mystery!" There's a group of men called the "Gophers," who formed a makeshift rescue team after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. They were a makeshift rescue team, but they have become an expert rescue team, serving around the world. The "Gophers" don't just stay on the surface and peel away debris; they gain faster access to their victims by tunneling into the rubble, thereby putting their own lives at risk. So this Mexican rescue team went to Haiti, and they were digging the week after the quake at the National Cathedral in Port-au-Prince, and they heard a voice from under the rubble. It was someone singing. It was Ena Zizi, a 69-year-old woman, singing. They dug down and pulled her out, covered in dust and severely dehydrated, but alive after being trapped for a week—and singing! (*Christian Century*, March 23, 2010). She was airlifted by a US Coast Guard helicopter and transported to the USS Bataan for medical care. The BBC film shows this amazing rescue effort, and the team, the "Gophers," hugging one another, and laughing and crying! (<http://mexico.foreignpolicyblogs.com/2010/01/20/the-rescue-of-ena-zizi/>)

Peter was like one of these "Gophers," eager and quickly right there on the scene! I don't think he could help it, he just blurted it out: "Christ is risen! Alleluia!"

Peter's Final Witness
Acts 10:34-43

We need people like Peter. He was impulsive and devoted. But he also had some solid follow-through. Jesus called him a "rock," and he lived up to his name. Here in Acts we have him preaching, giving his own witness and inspiring others.

We need inspiration today. We need resurrection! The Church needs resurrection! Midst all the reports of abuse, the Roman Catholic Church surely needs reform and resurrection. And The United Methodist Church can stand some improvement too. We have a campaign to "rethink church."

"Listen, I'll tell you a mystery..." A United Methodist minister from Texas by the name of Scott Heare was on a study tour at the Jordan River in 2003. He had been thinking about the Church and its need for rebirth. And there, sitting by the river, he had the thought that he should start a church and call it "Riverside." He came back to the States and got some training in church starts and was sitting one day in a Starbucks, and he began to think about a church, that could meet in such a place, where people were drinking coffee, relaxed, having a good time, and talking to one another. On the window of the Starbucks was a sticker that said, "Build Community." He got in his car and drove north. He pulled off the road at a town called Spring Ranch and parked in front of a two-story ranch house with a "for rent" sign out front. There was an old barn in back and folks around cleaning the place up.

Scott Heare convinced a San Antonio Church to pay the rent for this place, went to an auction and purchased the needed kitchen equipment at a steal of a bargain, moved in and started serving coffee. They call the place "The Loft." When you enter, you can smell a wood fire, strong coffee, and cinnamon rolls. That was 2004. Then came a food bank and thrift store and resource center for folks who are unemployed. Now in 2010, in addition to the coffee house and these other social services, there are 2 worship services with 500 people coming, still no formal membership or purchased buildings. This is a new kind of church. One that has been raised up in an amazing and creative way.

"The tomb is empty; he is not there." Peter's response was, first, amazement, and then the message came to him! It wasn't just about him! He had a message for all the world: "Let *all of God's people* proclaim the good news!" These are the words to our choir's final anthem: "All of God's people can walk in the light of a new and glorious morn!"