April 5, 2015
EASTER

No other day in the year is quite like today. Churches around the world will host more worship services than any other Sunday in the year. Preachers stand where I stand and see the faces of children and adults in their Easter finery. The fragrance of lilies, pastel dresses, men in pressed suits, choirs and clergy donning white stoles, all saying loudly “Christ is risen!” For us – for all of us – Easter has a brilliant, stunning upward look that shouts the news of our Lord’s resurrection.

Was it that way that first Easter long ago? As Mark tells the story, three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – shuffled through narrow Jerusalem streets and out the gate of the city to a deserted cemetery charged with love’s last gift to their dead Master. Burial duty was women’s work because, as they believed, the anointing of the corpse and wrapping it in a shroud rendered one religiously unclean. Such labor always fell to women. Theirs was a downtrodden,
downward looking, duty that was the least they could offer the One who had given them such generous and faithful love.

As they made their way, the one question that demanded an answer was asking who would remove the stone from the tomb’s entrance, granting them access to their Lord’s body. At that arrival scene we see their downcast, lowered-head posture . . . until the moment everything changed. Mark tells us: “When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.” And in looking up, they were able to look in. And in the looking up and looking in, “they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.” The young man speaks: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” Rewind that moment 30 seconds: Looking down at their feet laden with sorrow, they look up with astonishment and fear, and then they look in with curiosity until they look all around an empty tomb with amazement. This one detail in the story has my imagination. Let me quote the phrase
one more time: “When they looked up.” What might God be saying to us, dressed in all our Easter finery that just might be the best news we could hear if we, too, would look up?

We first step into that question by starting where this story begins. Three women, hearts broken with grief, hands ready for duty, downcast, ambling toward a tomb. Doesn’t life put us on that very road more times than we would ever want? In fact, just one journey on the road of loss, sorrow, helplessness, and grief would be one journey too many. But life, by definition, has loss woven into it. As children, we may first meet death when a beloved pet dies. By the time we reach adolescence, we may have to say farewell in this life to a beloved aunt, uncle, grandparent, or close friend. Some among us were thrown into the torment of sorrow early in life with the death of a parent or the tragic loss of a sibling.

When life comes apart, when death shows up, when sorrow rips out our heart and would crush it with uncaring brutality, our entire
posture, especially our heads, drop into a heap of helpless pain. Yes, the Easter story begins where life drops us in its stark finality – with our heads down, our hearts broken, and death’s tomb before us. Rather than looking only toward Easter’s wonder, the Gospel tells us we all come to this day with heads looking down. But we cannot forever stare at the tops of our feet or the dusty road on which we walk. Something happens, a friend walks in and places arms of love around us, a priest or chaplain or coach or neighbor draws us into arms of compassion to tell us love and grace would take us in the direction of hope. Often at the very lowest moment of our lives, we find the courage to look up into the face of God’s grace and in that upward look, hope is reborn in our souls.

Easter’s upward look is God’s invitation with our names on it. God knows our every weakness and winces with us when life unravels in a pile of pain. But God does not leave us there. Look at those three women, shoulders drooping from sorrow, tear ducts that are dry from weeping, ….they then look up to hear the best news ever heard by human ears: “He is not here!” When we look up, our eyes stare not into
the void of death, but toward the promise of life. At the very least, Easter’s upward look puts us eye-to-eye with God’s promise.

There is more. This upward look of Easter invites us to look all around death’s domain to name it for what it ultimately is. The young man who announced our Lord’s resurrection to these women did not tell them to shield their eyes from the empty tomb. He ordered them to look all around the tomb, to scan every chiseled facet of its cold stone walls, to gaze at the place where the crucified One lay, and learn for themselves how empty an empty tomb can be. God issues that same invitation to you and me today. Rather than denying the reality of death or using sappy phrases to mask death’s sting, God shows us just how dead and empty death is. We of faith can fall into the habit of sugar-coating life’s end to the point of denying the very faith we claim to believe. Rather than “passing away” or “entering rest” or “going to heaven,” the Bible dares say, “We die!” Such language is at the heart of our faith if we can hear it: “Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will
come again!” Because in life we are in the midst of death, we can say with hope and confidence, “The tomb is empty! Christ is risen!”

Only then, having looked up from the stark reality of death into the gift of life, can we hear and believe the news that is infinitely, eternally good. With eyes wide open, looking all around the cold walls of death, we hear the good news of our Lord’s risen life. Looking up, the women, alarmed and still wondering what is going on, hear the young man give them the Easter charge: “Now go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

For them and for us, Easter’s upward look takes us to Galilee as well. Rather than sending them off to somewhere, the risen One meets these women and the disciples where he first met them. Galilee, if you please, is code language for home, the familiar, and the known. So where might Galilee be for us? Perhaps the story is saying that the simple but life-changing message of Easter brings us to our true selves, aware that life is short, but oh so meaningful. Perhaps Easter invites all
of us with eyes that often find themselves looking down, to look up, to look toward faith’s home, to believe all over again that death, though real, will not have the final word. So look up, dear ones, look up to say and believe the good news: Christ is risen! Alleluia!