

Renewing Hearts

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 April 2022

A reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Easter Day C

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb”

I want to teach any children here today a special and perhaps unfamiliar word – the word is ‘liminal’. Any ideas what it means?

I checked the dictionary, and it means, *“occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold”*. Let me show you what that means. If you come forward here and put one foot on the step of the platform here at the front, and keep one foot on the floor, then you are standing on the threshold – right on the boundary – not on the platform, and not still on the floor either. You are in the liminal place

Now, in the story we just heard from the gospel, Mary Magdalene came to just such a liminal place – she came to a tomb; the place where they had placed the dead body of Jesus. She came to a liminal place, a threshold place between death and life. Now I want to talk to the older folk here today about what that might mean for us on this Easter Day. And you can help us. Can you see up there near the head of Jesus there is a little bowl of Easter eggs? Well getting to that little bowl of eggs might be your goal. But to get there, you are going to have to cross the liminal space, from no eggs to eggs.

Now it’s not always easy to cross liminal, boundary, threshold space. And I am going to make it a bit more difficult for you, by setting some rules for this game today. So, the first thing you need to do, is to go right to the back near the entrance – walking and keeping distance, not running. That’s it.

So the rules are – you can only take one little step forward towards the eggs when you hear me say the word ‘liminal’ – and the adults are going to help you a bit, because when I say that word, they are going to call out the Easter word of praise, ‘alleluia’. So when I say ‘liminal’ and the adults call out ‘alleluia’ you can take a step towards the eggs, and we’ll see if you can reach them by the end of the reflection. Everyone got that – let’s have a practice ‘liminal’!

Excellent – let’s begin...

I thought we would think about the 'when' and the 'where' and the 'who' of the resurrection today, in a kind of gentle way, because we are only just getting used to the idea of its being Easter after Lent – and with all the sorrow of our world today it is hard to recognise joy at all. We are a little like those grieving first disciples, heavy of heart and blinking a bit in a new light that they barely perceive to have dawned. Indeed globally, as we transition at this time through disease and war and natural disaster, we are in liminal space.

Liminal space is perhaps best understood as '*in-between-ness*'. We experience liminal space whenever, wherever and with whomever we experience a threshold, a transition, an in-between-ness. Let me give you a few examples.

A liminal time would be the time between conception and birth that we call gestation; or between handing in that last assignment and graduation; or between engagement and marriage; or between day and night – the times we call dawn and dusk.

A liminal place is any kind of border or crossroad; a beach is a good example, between land and sea, so it is no surprise that some of the most sacred places on earth are small islands, with proportionately large shorelines. And as I said earlier, a tomb or graveyard is a liminal place.

So, what about a liminal person? They are any kind of person who does not fit our neat categories. A refugee or displaced person for example; or a teenager in their place between childhood and adulthood; or a transgender, intersex or non-binary person, in the ways that they provide helpful interference with our systems of power and control. Liminal times, places and persons are always simultaneously sacred, alluring and dangerous.

The times, places and persons surrounding the resurrection are all liminal – at once alerting us to the oh so potent possibility of the Divine; while at the same time tending to send us running back from their danger to the safety offered by certainty and dogmatic assertions. But there is nothing certain about resurrection. It cannot be proved scientifically or even theologically. It can be experienced, and in being experienced be known.

But like all things experienced in the liminal space – the space of dream and vision and transformation – it tends to ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Resurrection invites us to the experiences of invitation, hint, nudge – of something glimpsed in the half-light. Let's return to the when, the where and the who.

When is it first experienced? '*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark.*' That is doubly liminal, for not only is it dawn, place between night and day, it is also the first day – point of transition from the old week to the new – and coincidentally at the time when the Sabbath is over, so that symbolically the old Jewish covenant based on law is left behind, in favour of the new covenant of love. Hearts broken on the anvil of the law are restored in love.

The implication is that the actual 'resurrection', this restoring of hearts, has occurred earlier in the thick of night, and that what Mary and the other disciples experience is its effects. This is entirely compatible with Jewish thought, in which the great litany of the Passover meal remembers all the saving works of God done at night.

So where is the resurrection first experienced according to the account in John? At a tomb – and a rock tomb at that; a cave which can be entered. All such places are liminal, suggesting the psychological space between life and death.

But there is more. Mary eventually encounters the risen Jesus in the garden, itself a liminal space, neither inside nor truly outside; later, the disciples encounter the risen Jesus in other such places - beaches and on the road. These are the places of encounter – you know them – it’s the place in the plane or the train or in the airport, where you don’t belong to anyone or anywhere and there is a little gap where God can speak to you.

And what about the ‘who’ of the resurrection – or perhaps it should be the ‘to whom’?

Well, according to John, the first person to experience the resurrection is Mary Magdalene, and all the gospels agree that the first encounters were with women – the women who stayed through the crucifixion and did not betray or run away. Women who are themselves liminal people. For these women are not exactly conventional, are they? Or they would not be creeping about in the dark seeking to care for the body of a crucified criminal. And they are asked to perform a task conventionally reserved to men in their culture – that of bearing witness.

Much of what we know about Mary Magdalene has been coloured by later commentary designed to discredit her witness. But if there is any underlying truth in the claim that from her Jesus cast out seven demons, then perhaps she also knew some challenges to her mental health. That too is precious liminal space. What we certainly know about her, is that she loved Jesus passionately, with all her being – and a person who loves without reserve is also a liminal being.

So, resurrection occurs in the times and places and with the people who are liminal. This gives us hope. For every one of us experiences liminality – whether that be the joyous liminality of a walk on the beach at sunset, or the struggling ‘in-between- times’ of sickness and grief that so many of us have known recently. We are constantly being invited across the next threshold. As John O’Donohue points out,

“A threshold is not a simple boundary; it is a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms, and atmospheres. Indeed, it is a lovely testimony to the fullness and integrity of an experience or a stage of life that it intensifies toward the end into a real frontier that cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up. At this threshold a great complexity of emotion comes alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope. This is one of the reasons such vital crossings were always clothed in ritual. It is wise in your own life to be able to recognize and acknowledge the key thresholds: to take your time; to feel all the varieties of presence that accrue there; to listen inward with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward. The time has come to cross.”¹

And in those moments Christ comes to us – not taking away pain, struggle or new love, but giving them new meaning; restoring our broken hearts and creating ways across the breach.

To live with such hope and meaning is to live with the resurrection. So, may we rejoice in our liminal times and places; may we seek them out when our spirits are cramped and confined; and may we discover in and through them the resurrected Christ.

In whose name, Amen

¹ From ‘To Bless the Space Between Us’ John O’Donohue