Every year when Easter approaches, I find myself remembering something a parishioner in Marion told me many years ago. It was a woman whose son had died suddenly a few years previously. Her son was developmentally challenged, and was very dear to her. So his sudden death had been devastating. And she had been dreading the day of his funeral.

But there was something that happened on that morning that changed everything. She looked out her window and, though she had never seen even one in her yard before, it was filled with bluebirds. And she knew that her son was alive – that he truly had come to share in the Lord’s resurrection. You see, just a short time before he died, her son had opened a cereal box and the prize inside was a card with bluebirds on it. And he loved those bluebirds so much that he had put them on the refrigerator so his family could see them every day. Now, on the day of his funeral, his yard was filled with bluebirds. And upon seeing them, his mother was filled with a deep joy and peace as she remembered how her son had so loved bluebirds. As she witnessed this mysterious event unfolding before her, she knew he was alive.

I think something similar happened in the gospel today. There three women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James – had come to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with spices. But when they entered the tomb, his body wasn’t there. And as they puzzled over what might have happened, two men in dazzling apparel appeared to them – obviously angels. They told the awestruck women that Jesus had been raised. And seeing their look of bewilderment, the angels reminded them of what Jesus had told them more than once – that he would be handed over, crucified and that he would rise on the third day. And they remembered. As they remembered what he had said, they knew he was alive. They knew because everything that Jesus had ever said to them had proved to be true. What he said would happen, always did. Now this great and mysterious thing had happened, just as he said it would. And though they weren’t exactly sure what it meant, they knew he had risen.

Now there is another thing that could have happened at that time, another thing these women might have remembered that would have helped them to believe that Jesus really was alive. They might have remembered how Jesus had always reached out to those who were not held in high regard among his people -- the poor, the sick, the sinner, the marginalized, the foreigner and, yes, women. They could have remembered how he had reached out to such persons in ways that made it clear that he considered them to be just as important as anyone else. Remembering this about Jesus, these women would have known that it was just like him to have them be the first to hear of his resurrection and to bear witness to it.

Now initially, those men who had followed Jesus wouldn’t believe these women because, among their people, women were not considered to be credible witnesses. Obviously, they still had a lot of growing to do to become like their master. But to me, this makes the resurrection accounts even more credible. All the gospels agree that it was women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. And no one in that ancient middle-eastern culture would have made it up this way, if they wanted people to believe it. But then, Jesus always had pushed the envelope in ways that lifted up the lowly and the disregarded. So when we remember these ancient stories of how women were chosen to be the first witnesses to the resurrection, we will find ourselves saying, “The Lord is risen indeed!”

Of course, as we remember how the story unfolds, we find that those men who had followed Jesus, and initially were too frightened to do anything that would draw attention to themselves, also started reaching out in ways that bore witness to the great dignity of all people, just as Jesus had. And
how can we explain this mysterious happening except that these men also had an encounter with the risen Lord that somehow enabled them to carry on his work.

Our reading from Acts today is a perfect example of this. There we heard Peter bearing witness to the resurrection. But to get the full impact of this, it is important to know who Peter was speaking to. And we have to go back a few verses to find this out.

When we do we discover that he was speaking to Gentiles – to Cornelius, and the members of his household. And he was doing this in the home of Cornelius. Now in those days Jews did not go into the homes of Gentiles. But the risen Lord had pushed Peter to see that God shows no partiality – that one human being is just as worthy of God’s attention as another. And though Peter wasn’t personally inclined to push the envelope in this way, he found himself entering the home of the Gentile Cornelius to proclaim the good news about Jesus there, even though he knew this wouldn’t sit well with many of his fellow Jews. And I can think of only one reason he would do this -- the Spirit of the risen Christ had compelled him. Yes, when we remember this story, surely we will find ourselves saying, “The Lord is risen indeed!”

And in light of this, when in our own day, we see people who are moved to break out of their self-centeredness; to break out of the kind of stereotyping that pushes people to think that those of certain ethnic, racial, or socio-economic backgrounds are somehow inferior and less deserving of the same treatment as them. When people are moved to begin reaching out to the poor and the marginalized and begin to seek justice on behalf of the oppressed. And when popes are moved to begin washing the feet of the homeless, of prisoners, of refugees of different nations and religions – because they feel compelled by Christ to do these things -- then surely we will find ourselves saying, “The Lord is risen indeed!”

The risen Christ is with us, still pushing the envelope, still seeking to lift up the lowly, the forgotten, the degraded, and the oppressed. Christ is with us, still pushing us to see that all people are of great worth and deserving of our profound respect and care. Christ is with us, still pushing us into a life centered in compassion, mercy, and justice. Any of us who remember his sacred story and feel the push to do as he did, will know that the Lord is risen indeed!

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