From Uncertainty to Confidence

LUKE 24:1-12 (NRSV) ***But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.*** [2]***They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,*** [3]***but when they went in, they did not find the body.*** [4]***While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.*** [5]***The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*** [6]***Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,*** [7]***that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."*** [8]***Then they remembered his words,*** [9]***and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.*** [10]***Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.*** [11]***But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*** [12]***But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.***

(Word of God for People of God) – (Title Slide)

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Did you know—I didn't know—did you know that lemons are not naturally occurring fruit? Lemons are bred from a sour orange and a citron, and the sour orange is bred from a pomelo and mandarin. Lemons are not the product of nature, but of selective breeding.

The implications are astounding: "If life doesn't give you lemons, you can invent them yourself." I'll bet you know some people who do exactly that.

Journalist, Maria Shriver recently wrote, "A friend said to me the other day, 'You know, Maria, some people are deeply committed to their unhappiness. They don't want to change, and there is nothing you can do about it. It is what it is.'

"Wow, I thought to myself. Is that really true? Are there people out there who choose to be unhappy? People who have resigned themselves to believing that joy and happiness are out of reach for them?"

Her two questions, I think, were unrelated. The first question is, "Are there people who choose to be unhappy?" I don't believe there are people who *choose* unhappiness. Yes, there are people who seem perpetually unhappy—perpetually stressed—perpetually in despair; but choice is an intentional thing, and I don't believe anybody consciously and intentionally chooses to be unhappy.

On the other hand, the answer to the second question is, "Yes, there *are* people who, through hard knocks and disappointments and tragedy have come to believe that joy and happiness are out of reach for them!"

Shriver mentions an East LA organization called "Homeboy Industries." It was begun in 1988 by Jesuit Priest Gregory Boyle, and has become the model for over 250 similar organizations around the world. It works with young men and women whose lives have been taken over by gangs or prison and helps them heal, as Shriver describes, by offering them empathy, kindness, and a shot at redemption.

On the website you can read about their traumatic lives in the projects and on

the streets. They share what it means to be offered a job at Homeboy Industries after leaving prison. Some said they were not "ready" for that job when it was offered. Instead, they returned to a life of crime and unhappiness—it's all they knew—they could see no realistic alternative. But then, for one reason or another, some of them found their way back to Homeboy *when they were ready to heal*. Ready to try to understand themselves. Ready to choose happiness over heartache, and peace over rage.

I concur with Shriver's conclusion: all of us, regardless of where we live or how we grew up, need to heal. We all experience trauma, pain, and heartbreak, and each of us *has work to do* in order to heal. And we *can* heal—when we're ready—when we're able to see believable hope for wholeness and peace and joy.

Alcoholics talk about a "bottoming out" experience. They get so low mentally, emotionally, and physically that literally their only choices are to quit drinking or to die. When they choose to live—to quit drinking—there is an effective 12-step program of recovery and hope. Healing is available.

I wanted to talk about recovery and hope on this day that celebrates new life, to talk about healing because I know so many who always seem to be in pain; always seem stressed over things they rarely talk about—issues close to home, as well as some we see a world away.

Watching what's going on in Ukraine, I've wondered about all those people fleeing from their homes and their homeland—grieving the loss of loved ones and the loss of their homes—will they be able to heal? I've been moved by the compassion of whole nations as they receive the refugees; and I certainly hope we will keep *our* doors open and our resources available—so we can offer them love and empathy when they're ready to heal. Maybe our reception will be a sign of grace for them—a sign of hope for healing.

Today's Scripture from Luke describes people who were in pain. They're disillusioned, disappointed, and they're scared. Redneck holdouts from Friday's mob violence still stalk the streets, egged on by Temple authorities determined to wipe out any residue of the movement whose truth threatened their power and challenged their lucrative collusion with Rome.

And so, on Friday and Saturday the disciples hunkered behind locked doors, cringing at the sound of every step on the stairs. When they went out, they stayed in the shadows, collars turned up, hoods pulled low, avoiding crowds and gatherings.

But then, on Sunday, something happened: something totally unexpected; something the human mind cannot comprehend, nor can human language describe. Did a dead man get up and walk around and talk and eat with people? I don't know. My brain is too puny to wrap around all the things that can mean.

But *something happened*! Something that filled the lives of people who were

hurting and grieving and scared, who felt helpless and without direction or purpose. Something happened to those people, and they came out of their hiding places in the shadows filled with new life and new hope and new courage and a new understanding of life lived fully—now and forever—in the presence of God.

There's a name to that "something." It's called "resurrection". Some Christians insist that it was a literal, historic fact. At the other end of the spectrum, some will say it was a made-up story: somebody stole the body. Some suggest that in the post-resurrection appearances Jesus' body was something other than flesh and blood.

It's pretty easy to shoot holes in all of the above; but here's the thing: when we focus on whether, or how, or in what form, we may miss overwhelming evidence that, whatever happened or however it happened, people where changed!

Over the course of forty days, people cowering in dark alleys were in the light of day boldly declaring the gospel! People waiting for a military leader to overthrow Rome suddenly were confronting oppression, not with swords and spears but with truth; doing so at great risk to their lives; in fact, most of them died as martyrs for the gospel. People who just didn't get it, suddenly were eloquent and convincing. And as one observer testified, they "turned the world upside down!"

That's what we really can say, with confidence, about resurrection: it's about what happened to people at least as much as what happened to Jesus. The human mind can't comprehend, nor can human language describe what happened to Jesus; but we can see through the eyes of history what happens to people who experience the unexplainable presence of the risen Christ.

And here's the best news of all: it still happens. Alcoholics do get sober when they turn their will and their life over to their higher power. Broken relationships are healed. People who've lived lives of crime become productive citizens. People who are aimless and without purpose become focused and committed. People who've given up—accepted lives of hopelessness and anxiety—accepted the victim role—have found relief and peace and hope. They have found healing.

There's so much pain in our world, and there probably is pain in you. Just remember there always is opportunity to heal, because resurrection was not a one-and-done thing that happened to Jesus! Resurrection is an ongoing reality—an eternal quality of life lived fully in the presence and the awareness of God. And my hope is that you will heal, because healing is available—new life is available. And I hope you don't have to "bottom out" before you become ready to heal.

The real miracle of Easter is that anybody ever believed. But whatever happened, whatever you believe about it, the undeniable truth is that people were changed—the world was changed. Never lose hope that it's possible. Always keep your door open for the unimaginable—the unbelievable.