

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
Easter Sunday – March 31, 2024
John 20:1-18
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I would venture to say that all of us love a good story. I don't know about you, but I'm always reading at least one "story book" every evening. And I love to watch stories, too. We read stories, we watch stories, some of us perform in stories on stage. We talk about stories, sometimes in school or in book groups formed to do just that. Stories engage and entertain us. Good stories give us insight into human behavior and human personality. They widen our perspective on life, the perspective that is shaped and limited by our own experiences alone. Stories can be fiction or fact. When fact, we call them history. Those may be the stories you like best. For most of us, stories fascinate us and draw us into new worlds.

Have you ever considered what kind of story you are part of? Scholars who study the stories of literature have identified two basic narrative arcs, or shapes of storylines: tragedy and comedy. You probably are familiar with the two traditional masks for dramatic plays – the frowning, weeping face for tragedy and the smiling face for comedy. These masks imitate the shapes of the tragic storyline and the comedic storyline.

In tragedy, the main character moves forward to a height of preparation or to actually committing an important deed, which is followed by a loss and descent into catastrophe. Think of the shape of a frown. In comedy, the arc is reversed. Think of the shape of a smile. At first there is the descent of the main character into a situation of loss or seemingly inescapable difficulty, which is followed by a turn-around that brings the story to a triumphal conclusion.

When we gather in church for worship, part of what we do is to listen to the stories that have shaped Jewish and Christian people for centuries. This past week, from Palm Sunday until today, we have been immersed in the most important story of all for followers of Jesus – the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in triumph, hailed as king of the Jews, followed by his betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

What kind of story is Jesus' story? Clearly, if Jesus' life had indeed ended on the cross, his story would have been pure tragedy. Jesus would have been a compelling tragic hero, someone whose tragic flaws – the characteristics which brought about his destruction – were honesty, courage, faith in God, compassion, and self-giving love in action. A tragic hero worthy of our admiration, perhaps even worthy of our imitation, but a tragic hero, nonetheless.

But today, on this marvelous day when we hear the Gospel account of the empty tomb of Jesus and of his first appearance as Risen Lord to Mary Magdalene, today we know that God's great story is not tragedy, but comedy. God raised Jesus from death to new life, life more full of life, more solid, of greater depth and power than Jesus' life before the apparent tragedy of his crucifixion. In raising Jesus to life God acted to vindicate the way of life Jesus taught and lived. There is nothing ultimately tragic about a faithful, courageous life of compassionate, self-giving love, no matter how such a life may appear, from a human point of view.

We are gathered here this morning because we have chosen – or been chosen – to be followers of Jesus. We have chosen – or been chosen – to be part of a great story, God's story of salvation. What does that mean for us, as we live out our own personal stories? I couldn't possibly list everything it means for myself or for you, but I will say this – it means hope. Take that deeply into your hearts and minds and souls. Hope. For if we follow Jesus, if we trust God's promises, if we live with love, then we know that the real story we are part of is comedy, not tragedy. We may not see how we will reach the triumphal conclusion of the story, we may feel overwhelmed, hurt, and thwarted by trials and challenges and suffering and evil along the way, but we live in hope. God has given God's "yes" to love and to life.

Each of us has a part to play in God's story. We aren't given a script that tells us exactly what to say and do. But we are given a choice of storylines and many examples of characters who have chosen tragedy and characters who have chosen comedy, in the past and today. For Christians, the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus are our surest guides as we choose how to play our parts in God's story.

On this marvelous day, filled with the hope given to us through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we go forth to live in love because, like Mary Magdalene, we have indeed seen the Lord.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!