

Easter Day  
April 17, 2022  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud  
*Isaiah 65:17-25; Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12*

*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

That is the voice of the prophet Isaiah: actually, the third prophet to preach in the great tradition of Isaiah, speaking the word of God to the people some five or six hundred years *before* the birth of Christ.

It has been three years since we have been able to gather together in the same room to celebrate the central story of our Christian faith. And we know that Muslims will gather today after sundown to break the holy Ramadan fast. And we know that Jews around the world are in the middle of Passover, the holiest time of their sacred year. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are only three of the world's religions, of course, but one thing all religions have in common is that the last two years of pandemic have made celebrating anything in public challenging and often dangerous.

A hot topic among clergy of all faiths is how the pandemic has changed religious expression. What will be different? What will we lose forever? What will endure? How will we rise to Isaiah's prophecy? *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

I wonder if that is what those women were talking about on the way to their friends' tomb on that dark morning in Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James and the other unnamed women besides: what were they chatting about as they made their way on the rocky hillside? Maybe it was this: wouldn't today be a good day for the new heavens and earth that Isaiah promised?

Because way back then, the Romans were inflicting terror on the people, and the religious leaders had just spent the holy season of Passover framing an innocent man and seeing him executed. The times in first century Palestine were not all that different from the twenty-first century: on Good Friday, just three days ago, 152 Palestinians were injured in Jerusalem by rubber-coated bullets, stun grenades, batons, and rocks. I can just about hear the women talking it over as they picked their way over the rocky path on the way to the tomb. "Anytime now, O Lord. Anytime. Just make the heaven and earth new. We are ready."

The women had started following Jesus in Galilee where he talked a lot about the reign of God – about what it would look like when everyone came within the reach of God's loving embrace. But of course, Jesus' ministry wasn't all talk. He fed people. And healed people. And most especially, he drew close to people on the margins. Tax collectors and prostitutes

were his friends. And it was evident that when he talked about the reign of God, he meant that *those* people were welcome, too.

*Those people:* I met with a group of colleagues last week and we talked about the fear that the coronavirus has awakened in each of us. "It's not just that I am afraid to get sick," said one man. "It's that for a while there it seemed like it was a moral failing to contract the virus. It reminded me of how scared I was back when AIDS was the virus in the news." Who are the people on the margins? COVID sufferers? Jews? Palestinians? Vaxxers? Anti-vaxxers? The poor? The wealthy? Republicans? Democrats? Who is on your list?

Jesus proclaimed that the reign of God had already begun. AND *those people* are welcome to join in. Isaiah's promise was made good in the ministry of Jesus. And here's the thing, Jesus didn't jealously guard his ministry. He openly shared it. The men and women who followed him participated in the healing and the feeding and preaching. Everybody's work is important in making the earth new! And children and women and lepers and poor people and soldiers and tax collectors and every other sort and condition of human being became part of Jesus' movement to bring the reign of God into the hearts and minds of all the people.

And among *those people* were the women who followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem. The women went with him all the way to the foot of the Cross, where Jesus showed that God's love did not end. Jesus would not stop loving the people and caring for the people and serving the people no matter what they did to him. He would not separate himself from the people, even if they would kill him. And so, at length, they did.

*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.* And you can just about hear the women standing at the foot of the cross. "Anytime now, O Lord. Anytime. Just make the heavens and earth new. We are ready."

And so the whole group of them got up early as soon as the Sabbath was over. And they trudged in the gloomy dawn toward the tomb. They had seen him laid there; they had seen the great big stone rolled over the opening. But that's why there were so many of them, Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James and the others. "Anytime now, O Lord. Anytime. Just make the heavens and earth new. We are ready." There were enough of them to roll the stone away.

But the stone had already been rolled away. And when they went into that dark and scary tomb, it seemed quite empty. Except that all of a sudden it was full of noisy angels proclaiming the newness of earth and heaven. Jesus is risen! Anytime was *now*, and they ran to tell the apostles. And Luke tells us that the apostles found it an idle tale.

And I wonder if you are here this morning, thinking that yourself. I mean, the flowers are pretty, and the stained glass is beautiful. And the music is wonderful! But really now, rolling stones and noisy angels and dead bodies disappearing? It's a pretty story, and wow, it sure is nice to be here together, but—is it more than an idle tale?

Isaiah proclaimed the word of God: *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.* And Jesus showed us how that might be. The reign of God came near to us in the ministry of Jesus, who embraced the stranger, fed the hungry, healed the sick, served the poor.

But more, Jesus opened his ministry of reconciliation with God to every person he met. Jesus taught us that God's love is for everyone, for insiders and outsiders, for old and young, for smart and stupid. But more than that, the movement to spread God's love to everyone is work for all of us. That is what makes the heavens and the earth new – the movement of each one of us together to show the love of God to every person that God created.

The love of God in Jesus is full and complete, but it is not finished. The movement of God to the heart and mind of every created person continues because we humans continue to be born. God continues to create. Yesterday, thanks to so many of you who brought in candy and filled plastic eggs, we had an Easter Egg hunt on our front lawn. Don't tell anyone, but the Easter Egg Hunt is my favorite event of the church year, because, while we are waiting for all the kids to show up with their Easter baskets, I get to have a conversation with our youngest Atonemates. "What can you tell me about Jesus?" I asked. And we talked about the feeding and sharing and the healing. And finally, one youngster, eager to get to the point of the meeting, said, "Jesus made everything." This young brother of ours absolutely understands that Jesus is the fullness of God.

And that is good theology, as far as it goes. But there is more, because with God there is always more. Jesus is the fullness of God, who created all things and all people. But Jesus is also the fullness of us—the fullness of humanity. And in the fullness of the love of Jesus, we know that every single person is included in the reign of God, whether they are joining our celebration today or not. There is no wall that we can build that will separate us from the love of God, so why would we build one to separate ourselves from others whom God loves? There is no religion that humans can think of that God cannot use to show God's greatness and glory, so why would we keep other believers away from us? There is no human person who was not created in God's image, so why would we separate ourselves from ones who look different or love differently or learn differently?

It has been three long years since we have gathered together to celebrate the empty tomb and the fullness of Jesus, and we might want to wail at the strong promise of Isaiah. New heavens and a new earth? How long do we have to wait, O Lord? Well, were those women telling an idle tale or not?

My brothers and sisters and kin, the tomb was empty! Jesus' movement to spread the reconciling love to whole world has created new heavens and a new earth. And the creation of Jesus continues today. And so does our work.

It is wonderful to see each and every one of you here today. And it is wonderful to greet those of you whom I cannot see, but who are joining us by livestream. And I have a

reminder for all of us: those strong, faithful women were drawn into the reign of God by their risen Lord. And their work then, is our work today. We are, each one of us, called to feed the hungry, lift up the oppressed, heal the sick, and love all the people. It is work for every person here today – and too, for all the ones you love – and all the ones you will see in the course of your days, wherever you are.

Jesus' movement to spread the unconditional, reconciling love of God is our work and it is the work that brings the prophecy of Isaiah true: *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.*