

Easter Sunday (Year C) | St. James', Clinton

Joanna Benskin | April 20, 2025 | Isaiah 65:17-25 | Psalm
118:1-2, 14-24 | 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 | Luke 24:1-12

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be
acceptable in your sight, O God of hope who expands our imaginations.
Amen.*

Today we find our place in a story of hope for all
creation. Today we celebrate the risen life of Jesus. Today we
renew our baptismal vows; we claim Jesus' life and death and
resurrection, and we promise to do something about it.

Today we walk to the Jesus' tomb with Mary Magdalene and
Peter and find it empty; today, fear turns to amazement.

Today we help each other learn to believe that the impossible
is possible.

Today we help each other hope that even in this
broken world, resurrection is possible, abundant life is
possible, peace and joy are possible. Today we expand our
hope and our imagination toward the new life and the
goodness that God is creating among us.

I've been thinking a lot about hope and imagination lately. From science fiction to social theory to climate policy to theology, I'm hearing more and more about how much it matters what kinds of worlds we can imagine. The stories we tell and the visions we see shape our action and our ability to love our neighbors, and our perception of who counts as our neighbors. In order to move toward the flourishing world God wants, we are called to imagine that world. And so I hear a call in this Eastertide to nourish our imaginations and our hope.

The prophets teach us to imagine the better world that is possible, the better world that God is creating. Isaiah says for God's voice: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." The prophets teach us to hope for a world where wars have ceased, and all the peoples of the earth feast together in peace and plenty, and the wolf and the lamb are nourished together.

Jesus' resurrection teaches us to imagine a world where violence does not have the last word, where even death has been defeated, where sinners and saints rejoice together in abundant life. Jesus teaches us to hope that there is enough mercy for everyone to be forgiven and enough bread for everyone to feast and enough love for everyone to be cherished and enough life to outlast death itself.

Hope is not magical thinking, and imagining it is not something extra that we do when we're feeling especially positive or creative. Climate writer Rebecca Solnit says: "Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky... hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency." And so envisioning what could be is necessary work. It is part of how we bridge the gap between the world as it is now and the world of God's dream. It is part of how we move from all the Good Fridays happening around us toward the Easter that could be. Holy imagination makes actions possible that would not be possible without it.

We are called to actions that make God's better world more real. We are called to change our own hearts and change our own ways. We are called to feed folks who are hungry, to tell the truth even when it's hard, to shape our own lives with care for our neighbors' flourishing. In the Baptismal Covenant that we'll say together in a bit here, we promise to do a lot of practical things.

The prophets knew that imagining is a vital part of doing. Visions of hope that we cannot yet reach draw us onward to do good in the here and now. There are good things we cannot yet do because we cannot yet imagine them well enough to try. And so we begin this Easter season by nourishing our imaginations.

We continue the in the legacy of the prophets; we follow Jesus. We imagine a world that is possible by grace, even if we can't yet see how we'll get there. We look at the violent and unjust reality of our own time, and we live in hope that it's not the only reality on offer.

We imagine a world where no child goes hungry. We imagine a world where all kinds of people are free to be curious and creative and loud and proud. Perhaps we can dare to imagine life without prisons, life without war. We can hope for a world where people can live safely wherever they want to live, and no one flees home in fear, and no one gets deported. We can imagine renewing the earth instead of using it up. We can imagine all creation flourishing together.

With all love to John Lennon and Yoko Ono, I think we can imagine better than a world where there's no violence because there's less to be passionate about. We can imagine a world where we are fully ourselves, in all of our intensity and distinctiveness, and yet able to celebrate one another and care for one another. We can imagine a world where we live for today and also live for a love that is beyond us, live for the generations yet to come, live for new heavens and new earths as yet unknown at the edges of our vision, live for the wild and beautiful dreams of the prophets.

This kind of hope is an ax for breaking down doors.

This kind of imagination threatens the powers that be, and all those who profit from war and from the destruction of our planet and from the exploitation of human labor and human lives. A lot of money and a lot of fancy words go into making our mutual flourishing unimaginable. For decades, we've heard that we've got to bomb hospitals on the other side of the world in order to be safe and that school shootings are inevitable if we want to be free. For even longer, it's been taken for granted that some people have to work in poverty for other people to have food to eat and clothes to wear.

But we can imagine something different. We have a hope that breaks down doors and rolls stones away. We can imagine a future where the whole earth is holy, where no one shall hurt or destroy any of God's beloved children. We can imagine that even death, the last enemy, will be destroyed. We who carry the story of Jesus' resurrection are entrusted with a dangerously beautiful imagination, a sharp and heavy hope.

And if we can imagine that the God who created the universe became a person, and that person died, and then that person got up out of his grave three days later, we can imagine just about anything. If that's really what we believe, nobody gets to tell us any lesser thing is impossible.

But friends, if the resurrection of Jesus is not what you believe today, I see you and I love you. Whether you can imagine life on the other side of death or not, whatever your relationship with Jesus and faith might be, you showed up today to hear a story that stretches the limits of human imagination. If today's story is not your hope, I wonder if it might open up possibilities for you anyway; I wonder if it calls to mind other places or people or stories that give you hope and expand your vision; I'd love to hear about that.

And if you would like to believe the Gospel story but find that hard to do, you are not alone. Believing is hard; that's just true. If you want to try it sometime, we'll help each other, and we won't assume that faith is supposed to be easy.

Doubt is not a difficulty unique to our modern world. Doubt is baked into the Easter story from the start. It was hard for the folks in our Gospel to believe, and they had a lot more help to do it than we've got. In our Gospel today, when the women see the empty tomb and come back to tell about it, the men think it's only an "idle tale." Peter goes to check for himself. (Isn't it annoying when you say what you've seen and someone has to go check?) Even then it's not clear if Peter has put the pieces together. Today's story ends with amazement, but not certainty.

In Easter season, we will read about Jesus appearing to his disciples on multiple occasions to teach them that he is indeed alive. Believing takes time and care and repetition, like learning a new musical instrument or a new art form. Imagination takes practice. Even with the risen body of Jesus in front of them (which we don't have), hope is not easy for Jesus' followers. We have to build the capacity to believe.

We teach ourselves to hope. There are many experiences in this world that teach us not to hope. There are many things that teach us to restrain our imaginations and dream smaller. Many of us have suffered hurts and traumas and disappointments, and sometimes we've found that hope makes the hurt worse. Sometimes we've suffered so many losses that any change fills us with grief. After all the bad surprises that have happened, we need care and tenderness so that we can imagine anything new could be good. And so we help each other learn to hope again.

In Lent this year, we helped each other hope that the way things are now is not the way things always have to be. We lamented the brokenness of this world and the brokenness of our own hearts. We questioned the inevitability of this world's violence and scarcity. We practiced repentance in hope that change is possible for us and for our world; the way things are now is not the way things always have to be. That was our work in Lent.

And now we are in Easter, and we move to a new part of our calling and a new set of questions. We can ask: If it doesn't have to be like this, what could it be like? What better world could we imagine? What dreams of God can we discern in the words of the prophets and the life of Jesus and the Spirit's whispers among us? What is it like to walk in newness of life?

What new heavens and new earth are already reaching out from around the edges of this reality to meet us? If Jesus is alive, then what is Jesus doing right now? What new life is the Spirit already breathing in through the cracks in this broken world?

These are Easter questions. This is Easter work. And we ask the questions together; we do the work together. We help each other find visions that would never be possible for any one of us alone. I want to know what you can imagine that I can't imagine yet. I want to know how the risen Christ lives in you today.

So friends, let us help each other. Let us rejoice and feast together today, and let us rejoice and feast wherever we see God's new heaven and new earth breaking through. Let us make the new heaven and the new earth more and more real in our own acts of kindness and integrity. Let us question the impossibilities of this world. Let us come near to the visions of the prophets and to the risen life Jesus and to all the stories and all the people that expand our imaginations toward love and life and flourishing. Let us hold hope together, knowing that hope is heavy and hope is sharp.

And may God our Creator hold us in love through the travails and delights of the new creation. May God our Savior lift us and this whole broken world up into resurrection life. May God the Holy Spirit inspire our wildest and most beautiful imaginings.

Amen.