

**Easter Sermon April 12, 2020. Zoom Service**  
**“An Empty Tomb--A Transplanted Heart”**  
**John 20:1-20**

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I will always remember something I learned from a wise and trusted older pastor when I was preparing for the ministry as a young woman. He was helping me understand a difficulty I was going through. I was expressing my disappointment in my inability to form a mental picture when he interrupted me to say, “Karin, you realize don’t you that your brain isn’t the only organ of your body through which you understand life? We can know and understand important matters of our lives through our hearts and hands and even our skin. They are all organs of perception. They all have imagination and hold memory. His words seemed very strange and unreal to me at the time but they have come to mean more and more as the years go on.

It is obvious isn’t it that the baseball pitcher’s arm, the dancer’s legs, the soccer star’s feet, the piano player’s hands, all hold memory and contain within them the genius of their skill, their talent, and their art? But so does a good doctor’s intuitive capacity to diagnose illness, and a poet’s profoundly touching images that, when they are at their very best, seem to simply arrive only to be written down.

Since my important epiphany in seminary I have been interested in the ways that the body knows and remembers. One place this can be seen is in the clinical studies of heart transplant patients. In the decades since these transplant surgeries began, findings of cellular memories in the donated hearts of these recipients have appeared. You may have heard the popularized story of a woman named Claire Sylvia who received her heart and lung transplant from an eighteen-year-old male donor who had died in a motorcycle accident. She wrote a book, *A Change of Heart* that was later made into a movie. Supposedly when Sylvia woke up after surgery, she claimed she had a new and intense craving for beer, chicken nuggets, and green peppers, all food she hadn’t liked before.

Probably the most dramatically engaging story of all of those I read was that of an eight-year-old girl who received the heart of another young girl, ten years old. Soon after surgery, she began having vivid nightmares about an attacker and about a girl being murdered. She was taken to a psychiatrist who believed that due to the vividness and reoccurrence of these images, the nightmares appeared to be literal memories. It turned out that the ten-year-old donor had been murdered and the little girl who received her heart was able to describe the events of that murder so well that police soon found, arrested, and convicted the killer.

When we consider the phenomenon of a heart transplant--of receiving and living one's life with another's heart-- we can sense both the powerful centrality of the heart and the overwhelming mystery of all that it holds for human life. Scientific studies may have allowed these heart transplant stories of cellular memory to surface publicly and given them greater credibility to the modern mind, but finally the profound mystery they set before us leads us far past where scientific knowledge alone can take us.

Physiology defines the heart as a hollow muscular organ of our body, which pumps our blood through our circulatory system with the rhythms of contraction and dilation. This is certainly true. But if our understanding of the heart stops here—if our perception of the “matters of the heart” ends with physiology, the depth of our spiritual life will be profoundly compromised. If the heart is merely a pump, then why do we say such things as “He poured out his heart to me,” or “I put my heart and soul into it,” or “Now, we have finally gotten to the heart of the matter.” What does it mean for any of us to find courage by “taking heart”, or to show compassion by “having a heart” or to find intimacy by “sharing our heart” with another? What does it mean to consider, especially on this Resurrection Sunday, that a heart removed from a dying body can live on, not just physically, but in memory and spirit?

**(See slide #1 at end of sermon)** Our Catholic brothers and sisters hold in reverence an image of “The Sacred Heart of Jesus.” It is often displayed as an image of Jesus with his heart on the outside of his body. Here it is shown alone, as a heart removed from

the body. This heart burns brightly with flames on the outside symbolizing its desire or longing for the world. It is also entwined with thorns, which pierce it, making it bleed and creating a threshold for sorrow to enter and abide within. Above this heart rises a cross representing of course, the suffering of the Christ, but also the suffering of the world in which all our hearts live.

What can this image tell us about the nature not only of the heart of Jesus but of our own hearts? In the image, we see that the fire makes a clear gesture of longing, reaching with its flames beyond itself. It is the nature of fire to move out and to encircle. We often think of it only as consuming that which it touches but we can also think of it as purifying what it touches, even embracing it. Fire pushes away the darkness and brings the warmth of knowing and the hope of connecting to the world. When we embrace another our heart goes out to them and we want to know them with some degree of intimacy. The thorns, which pierce the heart point to the interior of the heart where sorrow lives. Tears of blood from within suggest this interior reality. Pain, trauma and grief live here in our hearts waiting to be remembered, reimagined, forgiven, accepted, understood, transformed.

**(slide # 2 Crying eye)** So, in the interior silence of the heart, one encounters life's deepest sorrows. The heart holds not only our individual sorrow but the sorrow of the world around us. In the exterior silence of the heart, one experiences the heart's longing for the world. There is a common misconception in our time and culture, that feeling is only personal, entirely subjective, and not as worldly valuable as hard facts or clear action. But the heart is actually the place where the longing of the world and the longing of the individual come together. Feeling is not simply a personal experience. It is the place where, as our hearts move out toward the world, the world is always, at the same time, moving toward the individual heart. It is in that place where they meet, that we have feeling.

The people in this congregation have a strong passion for social justice. It is a desire, which brings people into our church and unites them. This yearning for social justice

comes out of our awareness that the world can be, at times, a painful reality for many people. This is the way the suffering world comes toward our hearts and the way our hearts go out to meet it in compassion and charity. We hold images of people the world over being sickened and dying of a virus for which there is no vaccine. We hold images of the suffering of 70.8 million people around the **world** who have been forced from their homes by conflict and persecution--among them tens of millions of refugees. We hold images of a neighbor with a sick husband trying to support and care for her many children. Without this longing or crying out of the world being met by the sorrow of our own hearts, no effort would ever be exerted to find creative solutions to social ills and there would be no will for action to confront them. The suffering heart is a creative heart becoming a womb which can give birth to restoration and regeneration.

**(slide #3, Jesus)** Jesus as the suffering servant is our ultimate model of this giving of the heart. Jesus is a "heart donor" for those who will receive the transplant. His heart goes out to the world. In this powerful image we see him with heart in hand extending it into the world. There is an old tale from the mid thirteenth century about a Cistercian mystic named, Saint Lutgarde who supposedly had visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Once in a vision when Christ asked her what gift she wanted from him she replied, "I want Your Heart." To which Jesus responded: "I want your heart." He then granted this Saint a very special grace by mystically, in that moment, exchanging hearts with her.

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we had Communion together though we were physically separated. The last words I spoke before we ate the bread and drank the wine were the words of Jesus' command to his disciples at the last supper, "Each time you eat the bread and drink the wine, Remember Me." Remember me. What does that mean? Does that mean that we are to let the memory of Jesus' life as we know it through our bible stories remain with us? Does it refer to the warm feeling of gratitude and shared community we may have during communion? Well sure... but also surely more. When Jesus asks us to re-member him he is asking that we take his body and spirit within our own, to accept this transplant of his divine heart.

**(slide #4, empty tomb)** On Easter Sunday, we speak of the wonder of the *empty* tomb, But according to the story, the tomb wasn't really empty was it? In the early hours of dawn, the angels greeted Mary there and guided her toward the resurrected Christ. The scripture includes a report of Mary's weeping. This is not just an incidental detail. It was Mary's weeping that widened her spiritual vision and her receptive listening. Her weeping was a sign of her access to the heart's interior wisdom, its capacity to stay with the pain of grief and loss--not run from it. She could see an opened tomb. She witnessed a resurrection vision of angel presences and heard the voice of her teacher. The tomb we imagine at dawn on Easter morning can be seen as another image of the heart. Where do we put the sorrow that meets us in this world; the loss of a beloved lifelong spouse, a home which goes up in flames, a breast lost to cancer, a father who dies suddenly with the Corona virus? The heart is a tomb where our grief finds a home. How lost and terrified would we be if the tomb had remained sealed. But it was open. Mary met the angels as her heart became unsealed through her tears of grief. Our sorrow and the world's sorrow does not just disappear. It is not just here and then gone. It is re-membered, it lives again, and in the interior of our hearts, heavenly angels wait to transform our sorrow into a passion for and trust in life.

To each one who approaches the Easter tomb with love, reverence, and longing, its image invites an re-awakening of the heart. Its angelic presences are transported and transplanted from a far away, long ago tomb into the hollow of our own heart's silence, and we are guided, in awe and wonder, across this threshold toward resurrection into life eternal. Jesus' resurrection need not remain for us a vaguely understood ancient mystery. Facing the open tomb, which is mirrored in our wide open hearts, Jesus' resurrection becomes deeply our own. And so, each year, on Easter Sunday, we can sing out with sincerity and conviction, "He is risen. Hallelujah."

Pictures for Pastor Karin's sermon:



1. "The Sacred Heart of Jesus"



2. "Crying Eye"



3. Jesus, a “heart donor”



4. “Empty tomb”