It was in my preparation for last Sunday’s Palm/Passion Sunday that the title for this message came to me. I was focused on what an incredible three years Jesus must have had. What a mix of wonderful and good things like healings and miracles and feeding people in so many ways – both with food and spiritually. How many saw him, at least in part, for who he was and how exciting it must have been to follow him. And yet at the same time, he got himself in so much trouble with the religious leadership of his day. And he seemed in some way to enjoy making them think and re-think and look again at what the life of faith was all about and what it was to live in relationship to God. Last Sunday we looked at that last week of his life and considered what it must have been like for him to be denied and betrayed and abandoned by his closest followers and even hang there on the cross feeling that even God had abandoned him. I came across one quote that said on that cross was humanity’s worst, and God’s best.

When you think about it, it’s pretty miraculous that Christianity made it – and has lasted over 2,000 years. Jesus, through whom God got it all started, was killed – and died a horrible death. But “something happened” to make that first Easter morning happen. I always think back to my days in seminary and taking systematic theology. Everything would hang together in the story of God’s people theologically and systematically until we got to the resurrection of Jesus. Our text book, a green paperback by Gordon Kaufman, if I remember correctly, explained it saying the disciples experienced some kind of hallucination – but it was divine or something. I don’t remember the detail. A newer approach came from a different theologian name Jurgen Moultmann who just said “something happened.” I liked that.

And I love the thought shared by Barbara Brown Taylor: Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either. The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus’ life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them saw nothing at all because they were still in bed that morning...
Jesus lived a very powerful three years, we believe – or maybe try to - as Son of God and revealed so much of God. And he was killed – but something happened. Something happened “and the beat goes on.” Everything that he was all about – namely the love of God - the depth and breadth of which go far beyond our comprehension – continues. The beat goes on – yes, I got in trouble in the office for planting a “song worm” in someone’s head. From what I understand that’s when you get a song in your head that will not go away. Maybe I’ve done the same to you now – Sonny and Cher? I actually had the thought that instead of shouting “amen” during the sermon you could join together in “laddy daddy deee, laddy daddy dah.”

Think about it – “something happened” and the God in Christ continued the pursuit of us even after the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus appears to Mary, but doesn’t stay long. Jesus appears to others, even to large groups, but doesn’t stay long. That Risen Christ is on the move. That Risen Christ appears to Saul who becomes Paul. I got a kick out of the comment of one commentator who said as he reads Paul, Paul is a man attempting to recover after being hit by a bus. In the Risen Christ showing up, everything in this dying world is being set on its head. Time is disrupted, continuities, probabilities, and predictabilities so beloved by our modern world, are shattered. There really is something new.

And here we are gathered together today celebrating Easter and believing in the triumph of God in the resurrection. In some way or another doesn’t having your own encounter with the Risen Christ – with God - with the sacred or divine - in some way – have something to do with it? Perhaps in some way you and I are like Mary and in some way have heard God in Christ call to us, speaking our name.

I love the opening verse of our Epistle lesson from Paul. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. What do you suppose Paul meant by that? I have always wondered. How are we to understand “life” – is it this flesh and blood existence that we live? And if that’s all we hope for we are most to be pitied? Is Paul pointing to our need for hope in an afterlife? Or is “life” in reference to the way things are? If we have no hope for making this world a better place than it is at present, we are most to be pitied? If we “believe in” God and what God has done and continues to do in Christ – if we have faith – then hope is a given! And that hope can empower us to do something!
Let’s not get too heady. In my searching on the web I came across something quite thought provoking and relevant. One man quipped: "It’s not that I’m afraid of dying. It’s just that I’ve been alive for as long as I can remember, and I'm kind of set in my ways." Today is a day we think about life – and death – and perhaps the possibility of after-life. The message of Easter is that death does not get in the way of our relationship with God. But encounters with death can indeed shift our focus, our perspective on life. Bill and Judith Moyers documented death and dying in the U.S. and discovered many terminal patients they interviewed actually began to live with joy and passion only after they learned they were dying. Psychologist Abraham Maslow had his first heart attack, and after that he saw the Charles River, on which he lived, to be more beautiful than ever before. He wrote to a friend, The confrontation with death -- and reprieve from it -- makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful and I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it....” Perhaps you have had such an experience or have talked with someone who has. Some event in life that just changed everything – at least the way you look at it. And anyone I have ever spoken with who had a near death experience has no fear of dying.

I think the basic message of Easter faith can have that same kind of impact on our life. Perhaps “believing without seeing” that death is no longer something we need to worry about – God has it covered. By faith embrace death and its mystery as part of the life God has given us. Be set free to focus once again on living each day to the fullest and seeing the beauty of life that is all around us. So without having that near death experience, or getting that kind of news from the doctor, we can, by faith, get a new perspective on life. And the beat goes on. By faith our life takes a new focus and a new perspective.

In Philippians Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” So the beat goes on -whenever we practice that self-giving love that we see in Christ. Joan Chittister has a wonderful little book, Aspects of the Heart, packed full of good thoughts. She writes, It’s easy to be religious; it is difficult be spiritual. A religious life requires that we be just to the other. The spiritual life demands that we be compassionate to the other. To be deeply spiritual, wholly compassionate, we must remember that the one in need is simply another version of ourselves that we may have yet to meet in life but someday surely will. The world will not heal itself. Only a compassionate heart can do that.
The beat goes on in that compassion. When we reach out to comfort someone we know who is grieving a loss, when we lend a listening ear to a discouraged friend, when we welcome the stranger, when we offer a hand to a coworker in need, when we reach out to a classmate at school that we see is becoming isolated, when we seek to help someone else in need in such a way that the quality of their life is improved in some way – doing something that comes from self-sacrifice for the benefit of another. When that happens – the beat goes on..... And as the beat goes on – so does the dance –

We end this message with song!