

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28.1-10

Sunday, April 16, 2017

Within some of the carcasses of medieval cathedrals, the walls double as a storyboard and present major events in the life of Jesus. High rates of illiteracy, the inaccessibility of Latin, and the dearth of Bibles in that time, made these walls the reasonable vehicle for transmitting the Christian message. Among the scenes in many churches throughout France, Italy, Germany, and England, one might recognize the baptism of Jesus, or the feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps the raising of Lazarus, the Last Supper. Certainly, the Crucifixion and images of the Resurrection. However, time, inevitably, takes its toll. The images, far from clear and vibrant, are literally shadows of their early beauty. Chipped paint, the fade of color, and the weathering of time make some of the images almost impossible to discern.

When reading the Resurrection accounts in the gospels for Easter, it may feel as if we are experiencing the narrative equivalency of the visual dissolution of those medieval church walls. Cracks occur in the seamless stories that one might expect regarding such a momentous event. (Did guards monitor the tomb? Were there two women who came to the tomb? Three? Four? How many angels? When and where does Jesus make an appearance?) Key elements fade from view as you hear Matthew's witness or Luke's or John's. There certainly was a vibrancy to the event that is captured in each of the gospels. Yet, the crush of time and the water-under-the-bridge of human existence and, let's be honest, the cacophony in

our own life makes it hard to hear and to see--nevermind to *know*--what really happened on that Easter morning.

That *something* happened, it is clear. And, certainly, Jesus' followers were forever changed. Yet, for us, it is hard to distinguish what happened amidst the haziness of competing claims and various versions of that morning. Thus, the empty tomb is less about proof and more about perspective. Such a comment may seem a bit odd on, of all days, Easter Sunday. We began with the confident acclamation, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" and the echoed response underscored its veracity, "Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!" But what does this mean? How do we hear the claim of resurrection in 2017? Where do we see the fingerprints of life loosed from death? And, furthermore, how do we know?

Consequently, it is nice to see that the first witnesses were also a bit mystified about the events of that first Easter. Indeed, in Matthew's gospel, confusion reigns. To begin, an earthquake and the appearance of an angel, literally, shake the foundation for everyone. Guards faint. Women leave the tomb in "great joy" but also fear. Jesus' appearance to the two Mary's echoes that of the angel. He repeats to them, "Do not be afraid." Hence, far from certainty, comfort, and insight, the initial resurrection experiences are filled with fear and unknowing. So, if nothing else, when you ever find yourself in such a place, just remember: you're in good company.

And that terrain--fear and unknowing--is fairly familiar to us throughout this life. What are we to do in work or relationships or with regard to our health? How do

we negotiate the uncertainties of global crises and the awareness of suffering throughout the world that challenges our sense of God's presence? What of all the individuals, particularly immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ, and women, who feel within their bones the threats that exist with each day. Far from new life, many struggle to simply live.

Cognizant of this reality, David Lose offers a helpful perspective,

Jesus' resurrection does not spell an end to fear for those who follow him, but rather makes it possible to experience joy amid what might otherwise be crippling fear. Resurrection, that is, doesn't simply answer or end problems, but rather creates something new, and Christian faith does not remove us from the hardships, limitations, and challenges of this life, but creates for us possibilities that simply would not be available had God not intervened, first in the raising of Jesus and again by entering into our own lives.

And entering into our lives is at the heart of the resurrection and this celebration. Jesus' emergence from the tomb--from loss, suffering, death--is not a one time reality; rather, resurrection is something that continues to meet us in the midst of life. Our task, in part, is recognizing it, seeing it, and living into the promise that not even death can separate us from the love of God. Perhaps what we discover about the resurrection is that it is not a panacea for all things. Rather, it is the promise of God's participation with us in the totality of life and death, so that we might have the strength and courage to meet each day and situation and uncertainty with the compassion and love of one who has experienced the fullness of our reality and continues to meet us in myriad ways upon this journey of life.

Another perspective: the story of Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the apartheid era in South Africa underscores the aforementioned truth. One Sunday, as he was about to address his congregation, he noticed that something was amiss. The congregation, uncharacteristically, glanced anxiously around the room. Finally, Tutu realized what the source of this activity was. There were new people in their midst. People whom Tutu recognized as members of the South African security police. Tutu began his sermon and then addressed the police, "You are powerful." he said, "You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked." Then he flashed that wonderful Desmond Tutu smile and said, "So, since you've already lost, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" And at that the congregation erupted. They began dancing in the church. They danced out into the streets and the police moved back because they didn't know what to do with dancing worshipers.

Precisely in the heart of suffering and oppression, the ability to see and recognize the presence of God for and with us is an affirmation of resurrection here and now. In the resurrection, we have God's commitment that life is stronger than death, that love outlives hate, that mercy triumphs over punishment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient -- yes, they certainly are legitimate and tangible and sometimes painful, but they do not have the last word and they do not represent the final reality. We know, in part, because of the tenuous yet resilient gift of faith. We know, in part, because of the spirit of those, like Tutu, who continue to live into the promise of resurrection regardless of the death that surrounds us. We know, in part, because we ourselves are drawn to that hope that

does not offer absolute answers but walks with us through the every facet of life--joy and sorrow, love and loss, strength and weakness--and abides with us always, for there is no place that God is not.

Thus, a final perspective: the funeral service of Winston Churchill. At the close of the service that Churchill planned himself, a single trumpeter stood at the west end of St. Paul's Abbey and sounded "Taps," the song that signals dusk and the close of another day and is frequently played at the end of a military funeral. But after a moment of stillness that followed the last plaintive note of that song, another trumpeter stood at the east end of St. Paul's, the end that faced the rising sun, and played "Reveille," the song of the morning and the call to a new day. Easter is not a moment lost in time. Easter is every moment in time. And it welcomes us to into the morning, calls us to a new day, and invites us to live.