

Easter Sermon

John 20:1-18

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The challenge of Easter is that we have heard this story so many times, we stop listening to it because we know what happens. We know how it ends. Jesus died, and rose again. End of story. Now what's for dinner?

That's the challenge for all of us, preacher and listener alike. We know this is an important story, but we also think there is nothing new to say about it or to hear from it. And it might be true that there is nothing new to say. But what I've realized, is that I need to be reminded over and over again about the good news of the resurrection, for I forget what it is I know about the resurrection from year to year. For most of the year, I fail to let the power of the resurrection, the life-giving power of the resurrection, shape my daily life. For most of the year, I live as if Good Friday is the final word.

We live, for the most part, in a Good Friday world. Everywhere we turn, there is death and despair. In the world, there is always conflict, injustice, famine, war--horrendous acts of violence that humanity commits against humanity. Even in our own community, the culture of death and violence is alive and well--our communities are filled with abuse, domestic violence, sexual assaults, street violence. In addition to this, there is the presence of poverty, unemployment, lack of health care, homelessness.

Even in our own lives, we live in the Good Friday paradigm of not enough time, not enough money, not enough meaningful connection or engagement with family and friends, not enough resources to do what we dream of and what we want to do; we're not perfect enough, we're not successful enough. Good Friday reigns supreme when we scramble through our days, focused always on the next thing, anxious about how we will ever get everything done, how we will have enough energy, time, money, wisdom, strength, courage to meet the demands that are placed on us, and the needs of those around us. The anxiety produced by this 'not enough' mentality, fills us and keeps our eyes fixed on death and tombs.

It is a Good Friday world in which we live, and for the most part, we function pretty well in it.

It was definitely a Good Friday world that Mary was in as she went to the tomb of her dear friend and teacher, Jesus, early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. The heaviness and gloom and grief of death were real and present. She perhaps went to the tomb early that day, before it was light, because she wanted to be able to spend some more time close to the one she cared deeply for. Jesus had died. There, by his tomb, perhaps she just needed to make sense of all that had happened in the last few days, and come to terms with the fact that all their dreams and hopes had died on the cross with Jesus.

Still in Good Friday mode, she notices the stone rolled away from the tomb. We are not told that she looked in, but she immediately interprets the open tomb as a sign that Jesus' body had been stolen. She then runs and tells Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who are also still in Good Friday grief. They run to the tomb, and look in--well Peter runs right in--and notice the empty tomb.

One commentator says that there is a lot of running back and forth in this passage. And he says that's what happens when Jesus is missing, or we lose Jesus--we run around a lot. (Craig Barnes, www.religion-online.org, "Savior at Large", *Christian Century*, 2002) This is such a great image, both for the scene in the garden here, and for our own lives, in Good Friday mode. When we lose Jesus, or lose sight of Jesus, we run around a lot, not really understanding, not really seeing, with no focus. When we forget that the story doesn't end with Good Friday, when we forget about the resurrection, or don't really understand what it means for our lives, we get caught up in the busy-ness and the frenetic activity of our lives, and end up running around and not accomplishing a whole lot.

There's also a lot of seeing in this passage, but not a lot of understanding. The Greek has 3 words for seeing, and all 3 appear in this passage. The one kind of seeing is what the eyes do--Mary sees the empty tomb, the other disciple sees the linen clothes. Another kind of seeing is a more scrutinizing kind of seeing, not just glancing, but studying what is seen; this is the kind of seeing that Peter does upon seeing the linen clothes--he notices the head cloth is somewhere different from the other clothes.

The third kind of seeing is related to understanding and perception--the other disciple sees and believes, after entering the tomb and seeing the linen wrappings--we aren't exactly sure what it is he believes, because it isn't the full understanding of the resurrection, for verse 9 says that they did not understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. In the Gospel of John, however, it is this particular seeing, the kind that leads to understanding, that is very important. What the Gospel writer wants for all the followers of Jesus is that they would see and understand, which would lead to belief--20:31---But these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

But in Good Friday mode, it is really hard to see beyond the grief. It is really hard to look beyond the tomb, even if it is empty. It is easy to return to our homes, having seen something that we can't make sense of. In Good Friday grief, even in the presence of the empty tomb, it is very hard to see anything but what we expect to see--more death and loss--"they have stolen his body".

There are times when we see, but don't recognize, like Mary seeing the risen Jesus, but thinking he's the gardener. She sees him, but doesn't recognize him because he is not where she expects him to be. The person before her can't be Jesus, because Jesus is dead, so therefore, the person before her must be the gardener. The promise the resurrection has to offer us stands before us, but in our Good Friday grief, we can't see it.

What is important to note, though, is that in speaking to her, Jesus gets her to turn from the empty tomb. In order to see the resurrection, we need to not just have eyes to see it, but we need to also turn away from all that entombs us and holds us back from seeing the risen Christ. It is a matter of sight, but it is also a matter of direction, of posture, of turning.

What is also important is that some of us need more than our eyes to understand and claim the resurrection. We need to hear Jesus call our names. Some, like the Beloved Disciple, can see the evidence of the resurrection, and while not fully understanding, can believe and walk into a new life. Others of us, like Mary, can see the evidence of the resurrection,

but need a personal encounter with the risen Christ, who calls our names. It is in hearing our names that we recognize the risen Christ. This story, along with the other Gospel accounts, offers us a variety of ways to encounter the risen Christ in our lives. There isn't just one pattern, or model or way for us to encounter Christ. The ways are as numerous as the followers; as unique as each person. The promise of the resurrection is that it comes to each of us, names us, and calls us to new life. It doesn't negate the journey we've been on, but brings us out, through, to a new way of seeing and being.

The resurrection isn't a return to the way things always were. There was something different about the risen Christ--he had a body, and yet at times he was unrecognizable. He could move through walls, and yet his physical body could eat, it could be touched, it could be clung to. He walked in newness of life, and yet he bore the wounds of his dying. He was the same Jesus they had known, and he was different somehow.

The resurrection changes us. We might bear the marks of Good Friday, but in the light of the resurrection, we are changed--oriented in a new direction, given new vision, new hope--a new life. The Glorious Renderings wall hanging that Roxanna made is a beautiful example of how the Good Friday rendings, rippings, tearings, wounds are transformed into something new, into a beauty that could not exist if the rending had not happened. It was necessary for Jesus to go through his Good Friday suffering and death, in order to experience resurrected life. Without the Good Friday death, there is no Easter Sunday resurrection. It is only through ripping the cloth, cutting the whole into pieces, that we get the beauty of something new.

This does not glorify suffering, or make the suffering all ok in the end. It is not saying God causes suffering so that we can get to this new state. But knowing about and remembering the resurrection gives us the hope we need to endure the suffering, trusting the promise of life beyond death, trusting the promise of an end to suffering. Resurrection transforms all that leads us toward death, into something new, something that couldn't have been without the suffering. Resurrection gives us new eyes to see new possibilities, to tell new stories, to turn in a new direction, to embrace life anew after suffering. People who go on to find deep joy and fulfillment in a second marriage after the death of a spouse exhibit this kind of resurrection hope;

the willingness to give a person who has wronged us a second chance; being the person who is given a second chance. Any time we find joy and deep fulfillment after a painful event, we are living into the power of resurrection hope. It's not that we are saying: God caused this really hard thing so that I could now experience this really good thing. It is rather saying: That was really hard and I wish I didn't have to go through it, but God was with me. And wow, look at this really good thing that is here now. Thank you, God, I couldn't have done it without you. It is recognizing that we wouldn't choose that really bad experience, nor wish it on anyone else; and oh, wow, there is this other really good thing that I now have. The resurrection allows us to hold them side by side, recognizing what we've come through and where we are now, and offering our thanks to the risen Christ for joy that comes after sorrow. This new thing wouldn't have happened without the suffering; but the suffering didn't happen so that the new thing could happen. We just hold that knowledge and recognize the resurrection at work to transform Good Friday sorrow into Easter Sunday joy.

It is easy to stay focused on the tomb, to let our own anxieties and fears of the future shape our lives. It is easy to let the Good Friday experiences of our lives hold our attention, our focus, our gaze. Easter invites us into new possibilities, new realities and it reminds us to listen for the risen Christ who calls us by name so we can turn from the tomb, and turn toward life and new possibilities. There is, outside the tomb, a risen Lord who knows our names. Do we hear Christ calling us? May we have the eyes to see the newness that lies before us, and the ears to hear our names spoken by One whom death could not contain. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!