

The Gardener¹

John 20:1-18

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My family never has been much in favor
of open-casket funerals.

“Just build me a box out of old pine sheeting boards,”
Pappy said,
“and be sure it’s too warped and knotted
to be used for much of anything else.
You’re just going to put it in the ground.
And whatever you do,
be sure to nail it shut.”

When he died,
we got him a ready-made store-bought casket, of course,
but we did leave it shut
when friends and family came calling
to pay their respects.

Early in the morning,
on the first day of the week,
while it was still dark,
one Mary of Magdala came calling
to pay her respects...

According to John,
she was alone.

It is not a *natural* thing we do today, you know...
not at all a natural thing.

Plant a bulb in fall or winter,
in spring you get a daffodil.
That is natural.

Plant a radish,
get a radish.
That is nature’s way.

Plant a corpse,
all you get is a planted corpse.
That, too, is nature’s way.

A resurrected corpse,
is not natural;

but,

according to our faith,
it is true.

When Mama died

we got her a ready-made store-bought casket too,
just like Pappy's,
if I remember correctly,
and we left it shut like we did for Pappy
when family and friends came calling
to pay their respects.

Early in the morning

on the first day of the week
one Mary of Magdala
came to the tomb of Jesus
to pay her respects.

By all accounts

she found the stone rolled away.

According to John

she ran to tell two of the disciples.

It is not a *logical* thing we do today either, you know...
not natural nor at all logical.

If you add two plus two,

you always get four.

That is logical.

Count them (fingers).

One, two, three, four.

Two plus two is four.

The square root of nine

is always three.

Nine square

is always eighty-one.

It is the way things are.

When you're dead,

you're dead.

That is logical.

It's the way things are.

A resurrected corpse

doesn't compute;

but,

by our certain belief, it is the truth...
it is the truth by which we are the church; and
it is the truth by which we live.

Each time we planned a funeral in our family
James Baker said it was OK if we didn't open the casket
when family and friends came to call;
but somebody had to come and see.

James Baker is the funeral director in our hometown.

He is a family friend.

Worked in Pappy's store when he was a teen.

Mama taught him in school.

That kind of thing.

It's the way of small towns.

Our lives get intertwined.

James Baker said somebody in the family
had to come and look.

Don't know whether it is the legal law
or if it is just James Baker's policy,
but somebody had to go and see.

Early in the morning
on the first day of the week
one Mary of Magdala
came to look where Jesus had lain.

According to Matthew,
there was another Mary with Mary Magdalene.

According to Mark,
there were two Marys plus Salome.

According to Luke,
there were several women
including two Marys and a woman named Joanna.

According to John
Mary was absolutely alone.

The great thing is not to decide
who was right and
who was wrong.

The great thing is to hear
what each is saying.

Today's Easter text comes from John.
It seems to me,
there is an important sense

in which we must all face Jesus alone
to see if we really do believe
Jesus *is* truth.

It is not a *medical* thing we do today either...
not natural,
not logical
and not at all medical.

When a newborn baby
takes a breath and starts to cry
the baby is alive.

It is a medical truth.

When the electrocardiogram and electroencephalogram
show wavy lines,
the patient is alive.

It is a medical truth.

When you're dead,
you don't make waves on the machine.
It is the medical fact.

A resurrected corpse
is not a medical truth...
resuscitated is medical...
resurrected is not medical;

but,

by our way of believing
it is truth.

Our believing it doesn't make it true;
but it is the truth of our believing.

It is not because I am a preacher
or because I am a nice guy
or even because I am a martyr,
but I got chosen to be the one from the family
to go,
each time,
down to James Baker's funeral home
to look inside the casket
like our friend asked us to do.
I volunteered to do it because I wanted to.
It was for me a rite of passage.
Each time,

with soft light
and smell of carnations,
first I went to see Pappy
and six years later I went to see Mama.

Sure enough,
when I looked inside,
they were right there where James Baker put'm...
in their shiny-new, ready-made, store-bought caskets
with Pappy wearing his golfer's tie
and Mama in her pretty dress.
There was nothing James Baker could do to make them alive;
or even to make them look alive.
I wanted to look and see.
I figured if I could believe standing alone there
I could believe standing in a crowd anywhere.

Early-in-the-morning,
on-the-first-day-of-the-week,
while-it-was-still-dark,
Mary-of-Magdala-came-to-the-tomb...
the-stone-had-been-moved...
she-ran-to-tell-Peter-and-the-beloved-disciple
who,-in-turn,
ran-to-see-if-what-Mary-said-was-true...
it-was...
the-beloved-believed...
they-both-went-on-their-way

leaving Mary alone...

alone with her weeping.

"Woman," said Jesus,
"why are you weeping?"

She thought he was the gardener...
the gardener...
imagine that!

"If you've taken him," she said,
"show me and I'll take him away."

I guess she thought she'd heave the corpse
up on her shoulders...
imagine that!

"Mary," said Jesus,
and she knew it was he.

"Jim," said Jesus
each time I stood alone by a ready-made store-bought casket
looking in.

At least I think it was Jesus.

"Jim," someone said.

Just like that.
I'm sure it was Jesus.

One thing's sure.
What happened on Easter
was not your usual truth.
It was not natural.
It was not logical.
It was not medical.

What happened on Easter
was real
but it was not your usual reality.

Easter has made the news a lot in recent years.
Almost every time Easter makes the news
it's because someone
tries to put Jesus and his Easter into usual categories.
The flap about the Shroud of Turin
was a case in point.
The issue of *Newsweek*²
with its cover story
about arguments among biblical scholars
is another case in point.
It won't work.
What happened to Jesus was not usual news.
What happened to Jesus was news of an unusual sort.

"Mary," said Jesus.

It was the familiar voice...
the voice a thousand tears dried...
the voice of a thousand laughs shared.

"Rabouni," said Mary.

"Do not hold me," said Jesus.

Wonder what he meant by that?
In the very next paragraph,
Jesus invited Thomas to touch him.

“Here, Tom, stick your finger in here (palm),”
said Jesus to doubting Thomas.

Nobody I know,
knows exactly what Jesus meant
when he told Mary not to hold him.

I like what Barbara Brown Taylor thinks he meant:

“...he knows that
all in all
we would rather keep him with us
where we are
than let him take us
where he is going.”³

I think Barbara Brown Taylor may be on to something:

Who wouldn't like to keep Jesus here
to make him over in our image
rather than risk going with him
to be made over in his image?

That's the way of the Gospel of John, you know.
Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus.
They all share much in common;
but each gives the story its own twist
to make its own particular point of emphasis:

For Mark,
the unique emphasis is on thickheaded disciples
who, to the very end,
just don't get it;
and even when,
like a blind hog finding an acorn,
they finally get something right
they don't understand what it means.

The church is like that sometimes.
Sometimes we just don't get it;
and other times when we get it right
we don't understand what it means.

For Matthew,
the unique emphasis is on teaching disciples
the truth of God;
and, unlike disciples for Mark,
the disciples for Matthew seem to understand.

The church is like that sometimes.
Sometimes we are teachable
and sometimes we learn.

For Luke,
the unique emphasis is on walking straight way
through the rubble of time
into arms of destiny
while stopping here and there along the way
to make things better.

The church is like that sometimes.
Sometimes we see ourselves as people of destiny
walking with purpose
through the rubble of our time and place
stopping here and there
to bind up wounds
on our way to the promise of God.

For John,
so unlike all the others in many, many ways,
the most unique emphasis
among many unique emphases is

that Jesus came from God

and Jesus is going to God.

“Don’t hold me,” said Jesus.

“I am going to God, and I’m taking you with me...”

“Don’t hold me,” said Jesus.

“Tell the church

I’m going to God, and I’m taking you with me.”

It is not natural
as we understand nature.

It is not logical
as we understand logic.

It is not scientific
as we understand science.

But it is truth...
truth as we believe it...

or as we long to believe it.

"I'm going to God and taking you with me..."
"I'm going to God and taking you with me..."

it is the truth of something that happened a long time ago.

"I'm going to God and taking you with me..."
it is the truth of something that happens still.

"I'm going to God and taking you with me..."
it is the truth that banishes fear.

"I'm going to God and-taking-you-with-me..."
it is the truth that silences guns.

"I'm-going-to-God-and-taking-you-with-me..."
it is the truth that heals the broken hearts.

"I'm-going-to-God-and-taking-you-with-me..."
it is the truth that sets all things right.

"I'mgoingtoGodandtakingyouwithme..."
it is the truth that sets us *free*.

"I'm going to God and taking you with me..."

it is the truth that lets us look in caskets
and be sad...
oh yes...
very sad
but not defeated.

Notes

¹ While there are no (or, in one case, few) places in the text of this sermon which require giving direct credit to others, those familiar with Luke Timothy Johnson's critique of the Jesus Seminar in *The Real Jesus* (Harper Collins, 1996) and the work of Barbara Brown Taylor in her article, "The Unnatural Truth," *The Christian Century* (March 20-27, 1996) will recognize that I have leaned heavily on their work. I am particularly grateful to Johnson for his theological insight and to Taylor for her images on the text.

² *Newsweek*, 8 April 1996.

³ Taylor, "Unnatural Truth," 396.