

Preaching Easter

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“Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark...” (John 20: 1). She brought no gifts, neither gold, nor frankincense, nor myrrh to anoint the body. Not even flowers for the grave. She came while it was still dark, when the light that had come into the world had gone out and the darkness had overcome. She came to the tomb early, before anyone else was up, to see the place where they had laid him to rest. To say a word to the dead that she hadn’t said to the living. To end it once and for all. When hope dies, it must die, not linger on. We must lay it to rest and go on with our lives. We cannot keep going back to the office to see how things are going after the retirement dinner. And though we can return to campus or the old neighborhood, someone else will be living in our room, in our apartment. Perhaps they will not even know our name. We have been told a thousand times: endings are part of life.

So Mary was distressed to be robbed of this good-bye, distressed to find the tomb empty, the body gone. She did not rush off to spread good news — only this: “...they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him” (John 20: 12). She had not gotten up early expecting resurrection. She got up expecting to confirm what she already knew: Jesus was dead. Buried. It was time to stop pretending.

Perhaps, it would have been different if she had never believed. It is one thing to be without belief always and ever. There are some who seem to come to terms with that certainty, trusting only in themselves or in their work or in answers which make sense. But to let the door open a crack — to consider the possibility of believing — that is dangerous. (It can be as dangerous as permitting doubts to crack the door of faith. Either way, the door never shuts quite well enough again.)

Mary returned to the tomb knowing the door had been opened; she came back to shut it. She harbored no illusion that Jesus was alive. She had been there when he died, standing close-up beside his mother. She could have touched him. She had seen it all with her own eyes and knew that it was true. Of course, there was no comfort in his death, but knowing he had died, she did not want that *fact* denied. She had to come to terms with reality and go on. She had to make closure (any decent therapist would tell her that). She had to stop believing.

But the body was not there. Jesus’ death could not be verified. The facts had shifted. The sun no longer revolved around the earth. The five books of Moses were probably written by someone else. And scholars say that stories of the empty tomb are late additions to the text, that it is impossible to verify their authenticity. Matthew shakes the ground with an earthquake the others never mention. Three of the gospels picture Mary with other women, sometimes carrying spices to anoint the dead. Here, Mary comes alone, empty-handed. We must admit that we can never know the facts.

But, of late, some scholars concede that stories of the empty tomb may indeed be very old. Of late, other scholars concede that the universe may indeed not be quite so accidental as they had taught. Respected cosmologists now speak of unifying principles and the possibility of some larger law encompassing all.¹ Of course, that does

not mean it is necessary to believe in God. There is always the hope that new facts will be discovered to end too much speculation about divine origin. Yet, some admit, the door no longer closes quite so well.

It is that crack in the door which is so disruptive. It is there that Mary stands weeping, looking into the tomb now empty, searching for clues. Instead, she sees two angels dressed in white. They do not phase her; she shows neither fear nor ecstasy. She speaks to them as to orderlies stripping an empty hospital bed. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." If the angels gave answer, she did not hear — anymore than we hear words at a funeral. She keeps weeping, not the wailing lament of mourners, but weeping borne of weariness. Weeping robbed of one final good-bye. Weeping because he was dead and she was still alive...for though the old demons no longer had hold of her, neither did anything else.

She turned to leave the empty place and, in the turning, sensed someone else nearby. She knew it was not Peter. Perhaps it was the gardener. Whoever it was, she didn't know him. There was no need to hide her weeping from a stranger. She treated him as she treated the angels, not looking for miracles from either. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." She listens through the crack in the door, but there is no answer to her pleading. Only her name. "Mary." Her name as she thought she remembered hearing it before, but that was crazy.

It must be the gardener — but, the voice. No, it couldn't be. She had been there when he died. She had seen it with her own eyes.

"Rabboni!" And the door opened.

"Do not hold me," he said. That is not how you will know me. Not by fact of birth or death, but some other way from now on. By a word spoken, a story told and retold...from any empty tomb, from a cleft in the rock from which you may see the back of God, through a crack in the door. For in such places, the Spirit dwells. "Do not hold me, but go tell the others." Go and tell them without any sign or proof other than my word attached to your word. Go and tell them the truth which cannot be verified. Go — with the Samaritan woman who forgot her water jug at the well. Go — tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!"

And know this, Mary: it is not up to you to prove it to them. Just to open the door a crack.

Of course, this word is not only for Mary. It is for you and anyone who hears the Easter gospel then dares to stand up and preach. It is true whether you preach from the gospel of John or from the Year A cycle of readings in the Gospel of Matthew. It is true at the Vigil: after the first fire of Easter has sent shadows dancing on the sanctuary walls, after the readings of God's saving acts throughout time, after the splashing of baptismal waters on one or everyone gathered 'round the font. That very night, the words of Matthew's angel must be overheard in the passing of the peace: "The peace of God be with you. (Do not be afraid.)" The word is heard on Easter morning when the first rays of dawn touch hills and farms, row houses and high-rises. In a voice not quite awake the pastor proclaims, "Christ is risen!" And though it is too early, the people shout back: "Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!" The word is heard later in the morning, after the breakfast has been served in the social hall and the children's

bonnets and grown-ups ties have slipped or come undone. The never-miss-a-Sunday worshippers are seated beside those who haven't come since Christmas Eve when it was too dark to distinguish one face from another. Each one will be listening through a crack in the door.

"Remember, it is not up to you to prove it to them...." But we are always tempted to try. It is not the shroud of Turin that is most tempting, but other ways of making resurrection reasonable.

It has been known in the history of Christian preaching for the Easter proclamation to lose its radical character and for the theological center to be ignored in the interest of making the day more palatable to modern sensibilities....Spring symbolism has become the content of the Easter message, and resurrection is reduced to a biological necessity, a regeneration of the earth....It is salutary for those of us in the northern hemisphere to remember that in half the world Easter occurs in the autumn.²

Resurrection is not the changing of the seasons. It is not the brave blossoming of crocuses through winter snow (though that is a marvel to behold!) Resurrection is not surprising in the way that green leaves are surprising after a long winter — for though the first green catches us off guard while we were blinking, we expected it to happen.

Jesus was not a daffodil sleeping underground until the warmth of April brought new life. Jesus was the child of Mary, born as any child is born. And when Jesus died in the darkness of midday, his mother wept as every mother weeps at the insoluble death of a child. She did not expect him to appear come spring or any other season. (But hadn't he said he would rise again after three days? Such words are never heard against the reality of what we know. Who can believe that they will love again when the one they loved most has walked out the door? Who really hears words of comfort in the midst of tragic loss?) The women who stood in the darkness at midday heard only one thing: it is finished.

Jesus was dead. That was what the women of Matthew's Gospel had seen. They had been present for the burial. It is that reality we must preach rather than the immortality of the soul. In Matthew, it is clear that the earth itself did not expect this rising. There was no gentle pushing away of soil to make room for new life. The earth itself had to be shaken, the very foundations cracked open, angels summoned instead of gardeners. In the face of resurrection, the powers of government and national security trembled and became like the dead. Confronted with this unnatural, unexpected act of God, the women who came to the tomb heard the most unbelievable words of all: "Do not be afraid."

To open the door to this Easter word means that we must proclaim resurrection as more than a metaphor. Not daffodils. Not life inside a stone-like egg. Not barren trees giving birth to spring one April morning. There may be experiences which are like resurrection, but resurrection is not like any of them. This sounds odd, ridiculous, impossible. But turning resurrection into a metaphor robs God's story of its content and its power. It is not palatable nor reasonable. Thus, news of resurrection begins with one of scripture's biggest words: the little word "but."

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid. I know that you are

looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message to you” (Matthew 28: 5-7).

Some may come looking for spring, *but* this is truth that the seasons cannot tell. Others come believing in the eternal life of the human spirit, *but* this news of resurrection means taking death seriously. Some will come knowing the story by heart from past Easters, *but* will they dare to go on to Galilee? Matthew’s Gospel, the appointed reading for this year’s cycle, bids us leave the tomb and look for the risen Jesus somewhere else. In this sense, the gospel calls us to see all of life through the lens of resurrection. And Jesus’ own life and ministry bear witness to resurrection *before* death, as well as after.

Melanie Morrison speaks of such an understanding when she remembers her own experience of hearing an Easter sermon in Dutch during her first year in the Netherlands. She kept hearing one word over and over, the word *opstanding*, and finally asked her neighbor what the word meant. “Resurrection!” her neighbor whispered. Though Morrison had often heard (in English) that Jesus “rose from the dead,” she now heard in a new way:

Of course that’s what we say, but it sounds so different. Resurrection — the act of standing up. Perhaps when words like “resurrection” become theological doctrines of the church, there is a danger that we hear them as concepts, abstractions that have taken on a static quality. The encounter with the Dutch word “opstanding” helped me see and hear again the dynamic, verbal quality of resurrection as an event rather than a concept.... Suddenly, I realized that this dynamic — this standing up from death to life — is found not only in the Easter narratives but throughout the Gospels. Jesus was continually calling people to arise, to stand up, to actively forsake the ways of death and choose life. Time and again we hear this resurrection challenge in the healing narratives, in the calling of the disciples, and in his parables.³

To see and hear resurrection in Jesus’ life before death does not change the radical truth of the Easter word: the one who was crucified and buried has been raised from the dead. He is not here — indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Easter preaching never stands for long by that crack in the door. Resurrection calls the preacher and the listeners to go — believing that the Easter word changes the way we see everything from here on out. Resurrection, though not a metaphor, becomes the source and center of our metaphors. It becomes possible to say, “This is like resurrection” even though Jesus’ resurrection cannot be reduced to the sum of our images or life experiences.

This movement — from the empty tomb toward Galilee, from Jesus’ resurrection to our own — is what I will call “the oleo factor” in Easter preaching. You may not remember the old oleo, but when I was a little girl in Iowa, the cheaper spread was outlawed. It wasn’t exactly illegal, but it could be sold only if it did not look

like butter. Since my father sold milk to the creamery, we were glad that oleo looked so strange: it came in plastic pouches and looked exactly like lard. But my grandmother bought oleo. And sometimes, she let me help her turn it into almost-butter. In the midst of the whitish blob there was a bright red-orange dot. If you massaged the bag, the dot would get warmed up and break open spreading color throughout the bag — turning the “lard” a bright, butter yellow.

I had forgotten all about the oleo until it turned up in a book by poet/essayist Audre Lorde. I sat up with great delight and a bit of laughter upon finding my grandmother’s oleo in Lorde’s essay about “the erotic as power.” She, too, had massaged the margarine bags and the memory became for her a metaphor:

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.⁴

Audre Lorde is speaking about the erotic, about passion as a source of energy often blocked or cut off. She is not speaking of Jesus’ resurrection — yet, what do we mean when we speak about Christ’s “passion”? Usually, the passion story means the last days of Jesus’ life, his betrayal and trial, his crucifixion and dying. Passion is deep sadness, sorrow unto death. But isn’t *passion* also exuberant joy and delight unto dancing? This story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is God’s most passionate way of speaking. God is trying to change us with this story, squeezing gently, firmly on that bright kernel of light and life until it spreads from the place where the stone was set to the place where my ways are set. God massaged the earth until the ground shook.

Resurrection cannot be contained. It has no meaning sealed up as a history lesson. Did you notice that in Matthew’s Gospel there is no indication that the women are bringing spices to anoint the body? These women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, had sat for a time opposite the tomb when it was sealed. And on this morning they came back “to see the tomb,” but there is no mention of anointing the dead. Could it be that they believed what Jesus had said? Could it be that the bright red-orange fire of resurrection was already burning within them?

“Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him’” (Matthew 28: 7). This spark of light, this life shaken loose from death cannot stay here where the stone had sealed up the story. God is squeezing the story outward. Toward Galilee. Toward the sanctuary where you stand to preach. Toward the very ends of the earth.

For that is where Matthew’s passion story ends — not at the tomb, not even in Galilee, but with Jesus’ words of commissioning: “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations....” And the promise Jesus gives is more than a metaphor: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28: 20). I am with you, with you, with you. The word at the end recalls the word from the beginning: “...they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1: 23).

God-with-us is not a metaphor. The bright red-orange fire has not gone out. Easter preaching is not limited to one day (or even one night and morning): Easter preaching moves always toward Pentecost. It is one long sermon in many parts filling the Great Fifty Days until we gather again in Jerusalem. For the passionate love which came to earth in the one named Emmanuel could not be sealed in death. The Spirit of God

which hovered over the deep in creation, the Spirit of God which breathed life into Jesus' lifeless clay, that mighty red-orange fire of God's Spirit was not sealed up. It was poured out upon ordinary daughters and sons; it spread out in power calling the young to see visions and the old to dream dreams. God's empowering word of life and hope in the face of death and despair is poured out again and again, even to the end of the age.

Even now, when the preacher stands up to preach, the Spirit of God is poured out upon the preacher and upon those who hear the passionate news of resurrection. Remember: you do not have to prove it to anyone, only open the door a crack.

NOTES

¹ Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 11

² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, and Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A: Lent/Easter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 100

³ Melanie Morrison, *The Grace of Coming Home: Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Struggle for Justice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 86-87

⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 57