

Protagonist Corner

Quite a Cloud of Witnesses

Luke 24:1-12

William Goettler

First Presbyterian Church of New Haven, New Haven, Connecticut

5:00 A.M. The alarm on my bedside table blares into the darkness, and I reach out, blindly seeking to restore the silence. For another moment, I regain the stillness of the night. But it will not be maintained. This is Easter morning. It is time to rise.

I lift my head and look out of our bedroom window, to the east. The sky is starless and black. There is no sign of the sun. I am early enough. But I must hurry. I find my way through the darkness and into the shower. There it is that I realize, as I have early on Easter mornings past, that I am not alone.

Oh, I don't mean that I won't be alone for long, though that is true as well. Within the hour, I will journey up East Rock Road, to the summit of the hill overlooking the New Haven harbor and the Long Island Sound. If the clouds have not yet gathered, the sun will be visible, breaking the distant Long Island hills to the east. A crowd will have formed by then, familiar faces from my Presbyterian church, strangers from the various city churches who have agreed to proclaim together the glad news of this day, and others still, from no church at all.

But even in this moment, in the comfortable darkness and solitude of my home, I am not alone. A great cloud of witnesses has already begun to gather. I recognize first the women. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others are already awake, and beckon to me to hurry. They hardly slept, and now as on every Easter morning I can remember, they hurry ahead of me. Like mine, their eyes are still sensitive to the morning light. They began their walk long before the sun was expected to rise. They pause for a moment to invite me to join them. I hurry to finish dressing.

As I do, I am aware of the presence of hundreds of others, thousands of others, who are also hurrying to join in the procession on this morning. It is the most solitary moment of my day, in the silence of my house, but I am far from alone. There are Presbyterian pastors, in homes like mine, with sleeping families who look rather like my family. But that is not all. There are Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostal pastors, members of Catholic orders, and people from every other Christian tradition I can imagine, waking, hurrying, and making ready to go and tell the good news.

I'm not entirely comfortable with that notion. We dwell, after all, in a church that is radically, painfully divided. I use words like *inclusiveness* and *justice* to mark my perspective in the same way that those on the other side use words like *personal salvation* and *inerrancy*. On most days, I feel that I have little in common with the other side. They threaten ideas and people dear to me. And knowing the ground I occupy, they don't often invite me to stand at their side. Together we call ourselves Christian, but it often seems that our common identity stops there.

And while I might nod in agreement when a teenager in my congregation belittles the faithful for their failure to get along, my motivation to do so is not high. I'm glad for denominations. Increasingly, I've been wondering if we might not need a few

more.

But following the women on their way to the tomb, I find that at my side are people with whom I seldom walk. Today, however, we won't talk of church division. We share a sense of excitement. Today we will talk about how we will tell the story of resurrection, how we will seek to find the words that touch the hearts of those who have come yearning to hear. Some will tell the story in English, and some in Spanish, and Korean, and Chinese. And that is just in my city. I can scarcely imagine the fullness of the telling of this tale that will take place in the hours to come—which has, indeed, been taking place across the planet for the hours that have already passed.

But I *can* imagine it. For I recall waking early on Easter morning while on vacation at the seashore when I was fifteen, and sneaking out of the place where we were staying. I hurried down the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland, until I found people gathered at the water's edge. I didn't know a soul, but I wanted to hear the story they were telling. They made a place for me in the circle. I never discovered which church was sponsoring the event. It didn't matter to me then as it matters now. I was in a pre-denominational phase. The issues of the church didn't yet seem so profound. I simply wanted to hear about the resurrection.

The Methodists served breakfast that morning, I think. I had breakfast with friends. In the years that followed, regardless of where I was in my faith journey, regardless of where I was living, or where I'd been the night before, I found my way to an Easter morning gathering.

In churchyards, in cemeteries, on hilltops, and at the water's edge, I attended sunrise services. Sometimes I'd go with others, and sometimes I'd arrive alone and stand at the edge of the crowd. I don't recall much about the words that were offered. But the places, I remember. The spirit of the each gathering stays with me to this hour. There was a bit of snow on an early spring Easter that didn't discourage the hundred who gathered in front of the capital building in Albany, New York. The cherry blossoms opened one year in the park in Wilmington, Delaware. I remember the Salvation Army band that arrived to wake up the neighbors and lead our song sometime early in the 1990's.

On each of those mornings, there have been in attendance people from many traditions and from no tradition at all. Some have listened with terror, and some with amazement. Most have had no more real understanding than the Marys or Salome had. Heading out the door, now, with bulletins under my arm, I'd like to think I understand what is about to happen, that I can explain it fully, that the reason for rising early on this morning makes perfect sense to me.

But that would not be the truth. When the service is over and the pastors sit together over a cup of hot coffee to talk about the day ahead, we will realize that we don't often get together in this way. We will give thought to those who have been present, and wonder a bit about the few whom no one knows, the ones who have stood at the edge of the circle.

And we will know that while there is much that divides us as a church, there is a defining joy that holds us together. The wonder of the God who holds life and death and the life changing impact of the risen Jesus Christ cause us to be one church on this morning. We walk together, following the women disciples, rejoicing at their good news and honoring their witness.

Jesus Christ is risen indeed. There is hope still for the church, and for all the faithful souls who dwell therein. Alleluia!