

The Resurrection of our Lord

Isaiah 65:17-25

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

John 20:1-18

Some years ago I found a plaque that sits on my desk to this day. I found it in the Signals catalog which caters to people who watch public television programs. A lot of the merchandise is related to British shows like “Downton Abbey,” “Doctor Who” and “Absolutely Fabulous.” There’s a large selection of educational toys—things such as “Your Child’s Brain on Mozart,” and how to build a model of Foucault’s pendulum or Brunelleschi’s dome and the like. Because that’s fun for your kids.....

Anyway, this plaque I loved was, naturally, written in Latin. Well, of course, I’m just not snooty enough to know my Latin—other than *tempis fugit* and *dies irae* and happy little phrases like that. So I can’t tell you what it said. At least, not in Latin. But I can tell you what it said in English: “Bidden or unbidden, God is here.” I like those words. I like them a lot.

These words may have been written by the Reformation-era humanist scholar, Erasmus, but it was the twentieth century pioneering psychiatrist C.G. who made them famous. Carl Jung loved these words so much that he had them inscribed on the lintel of his doorway and also on his tombstone. Now Jung was too busy being a pioneer in the field of psychoanalysis to be much of a church-goer. But he was deeply spiritual and deeply mystical, as I think these words give witness: “Bidden or unbidden, God is here.”

It’s such a simple, clean way of saying that, whether *we* expect God or not, *our* expectation neither predicts nor prohibits God’s presence. I take that sign to mean this: God doesn’t need my permission for being God.

But since it’s Easter, let’s talk about resurrection. You know the story of the resurrection in the gospel of John that we always read on Easter—it’s just so touching--Mary is weeping, at a loss to find where Jesus has gone. Then Jesus tenderly calls Mary by her name. And he commissions her to be the first evangelist. A woman, I want to point out, is the first to proclaim the risen Christ.

I want to point out that all four gospels agree that it was the women who went to the tomb first and are the first to find out about the resurrection. But in the longer ending of Mark (yes, the gospel of Mark has two endings—did you know that?!), the disciples don’t believe what Mary Magdalene tells them. Then just *listen* to what happens in the gospel of Luke:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.....But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

At my sermon study on Monday, one of my female colleagues quoted the first-century scholar and historian, Josephus who wrote, "'From *women* let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex.'" And then Lynne said, "So I'm tempted to say from the pulpit this Sunday, "Well, the disciples didn't think women had much to say, so I'll just go and sit down now!"

But just for today, anyway, since it's Easter, let's give the disciples a break. And let's give the writers of Mark's and Luke's gospels a break. After all, nobody was expecting resurrection. Even Mary, when the gardener spoke to her wasn't expecting he'd turn out to be Jesus. She didn't recognize him. *He* recognized *her*.

When the women came to the tomb, what they were surely expecting was death. As they were right to expect. Death ends our mortal lives. The poet ee cummings puts it succinctly when he writes, "and death, I think, is no parenthesis." Death is the great period at the end of the sentence of human life.

So we have to take the expectations of the disciples very seriously and maybe even forgive them for disbelieving Mary Magdalene's words. And imagine her own shock at seeing him resurrected, particularly given how wrenching it must have been for her to have seen him die. Most people didn't go all the way to the end with Jesus. Most of the disciples didn't. But the women did. They went the whole way with Jesus. They saw him, parched, shrunken, desolate, naked and dead on the cross. So what else can Mary Magdalene have expected when she went to the tomb other than the sorry residue of death and the onset of decay?

Was there joy when she saw him again, alive? Or was there fear? Who knows? I don't know. We speculate. But of one thing only can we be certain: She surely wasn't expecting him. Yet bidden or not, Jesus was there. God in Christ was there. And spoke her name. Her name, on the mouth of a miracle. In Luke, the disciples chose not to believe her. She was just a woman. Apparently they tell idle tales. Or maybe not!

Now, as I look out over the congregation today, I see faces that I didn't see here on Friday. Or Thursday. I see faces I didn't see here last Sunday when we read the whole bloody story of the crucifixion. Personally, I don't really know what it's like to show up on church without having been there on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. After all, I'm required to be here on those days. And when I was a kid, my mama didn't let me skip out.

Still, I do know what it's like not to want to miss a party. And Easter Sunday always begins with a party—egg hunts, candy, big brunches after loud and festive church services. I, personally, hate to miss a party. And skipping the Good Friday brutalities—I can understand that, too. I try to give death the slip whenever I can.

But by ignoring the despair and misery that levelled Jesus—and his followers—as he died, we end up making Easter Sunday into some kind of pretty cartoon. We end up *domesticating* Easter, making it about bunnies and chicks and all those things we know to *expect* in the spring—crocuses and lilies, brand-new dresses and warmer weather. At Easter we color our world in pastels: buttercup yellow and powder-puff pink, lavender blue and robin's egg green.

But the *real* story of Easter isn't about make-believe. It's as real as our own lives. The real Easter story doesn't deny the dark nights of our souls. It embraces them. The real Easter story calls our attention to them, telling us in no uncertain terms that, bidden or unbidden, *God* is

there. All the way, all the time. Not just at our parties (where we tend to forget God, anyway), but in our miseries, when we cry out to God the loudest and hardest.

And just because we don't expect to find God, or just because we don't believe in God, or just because we can't prove God's existence--that in no way alters or affects the possibility of God's existence. Or of God in our presence even now.

Maybe that was what was so startling for Mary Magdalene. She had to let her world be turned topsy-turvy so quickly. Talk about grace under pressure! She had to believe in something absolutely impossible right on the spot—that the forces that control human life don't control God, that death was perhaps not the eternal “no” of all existence but instead perhaps the passageway into God's endless “yes.” Confounding mystery! A defiance of logic.....But here I want to share the wisdom of the 13th-century Sufi poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, who gives us a piece of advice, as well as an important warning, “The eye goes blind,” he writes, “when it only wants to see *why*.”

We live, whether we want to or not, with the mystery of God. The mystery that not even reason, arrogance or ignorance can solve.

“Real faith,” the Jewish theologian Martin Buber says, “means holding ourselves open to the unconditional mystery which we encounter in every sphere of our life which cannot be compressed in any formula.”

The real Easter story makes sport of our expectations of death and finality. The real Easter story flings reason aside like an old shoe.

In the real Easter story, we are each called by our name, just like Mary was. We are invited suspend our disbelief and freefall in grace, taking on faith no less than what the age-empty tomb tells us: that bidden or unbidden, God is *here*.

So what does resurrection look like in our own lives? How do we live our lives, 2,000 years later, on this side of resurrection? Tough question, honestly. I tell you, that's the question I want to ask whenever I look at war and our long history of warring. That's the question I want to ask when I look at our cheap and ugly presidential politics. That's the question I want to ask when bills and policies and social movements that combat our social ills run aground again and again. Is warring and sparring and wrangling living like resurrection people?

So how do we live the resurrection in our lives? Personally, I think we need to keep speaking out on behalf of those oppressed, marginalized, victimized, brutalized. I think we need to keep our wits about us and vote and lobby and petition and write letters and be good civic stewards.

But we need to live resurrection in our hearts every bit as much. So as the Easter season opens and spring broadens our horizons, I invite you to move into the seven week of Easter trying to identify how you can live with resurrection in your heart and in your life. Fatigue and discouragement are easy default emotions. Compassion takes resiliency. Hope demands courage. Paying attention demands our awareness. But isn't it just for these things that Christ was resurrected, so that we might be resurrected ourselves into fuller life, greater trust in God and a more caring relationship to the world in which we live?

The Guatemalan poet and activist, Julia Esquivel who has devoted her life to battling human rights abuses, has a poem entitled, “Threatened with Resurrection.” In it she writes about the sleeplessness of those who work for peace and justice. But she says it is not the horror of this life, nor the noise of this life that leads to sleeplessness. Rather it is a kind of hope, a hope that cannot be vanquished. And hope itself is a kind of vigil for the living. Here are Julia Esquivel's closing lines of her poem:

No, brother,
it is not the noise in the streets
which does not let us sleep.

Because in this marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
in bearing the courage necessary
to arrive at the goal which lies beyond death...

Join us in this vigil
and you will know what it is to dream!
Then you will know how marvelous it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake,
to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying,
and to know ourselves already
resurrected!

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds
in Christ Jesus.
Amen.