

Whose Story is Told Today?
Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018
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Who gets to tell the story, on Easter Day? Well, depending on which Gospel you read, or whether you read an account in Acts or the letters of Paul, it varies. Today, first Luke gets to tell the story, in the Book of Acts, through the medium of a sermon by the disciple Peter (read to us clearly and beautifully by Gunnar.) Then, Mark gets to tell the story. And this is curious: the original manuscript of Mark ended right there, at verse 8, leaving us hanging with “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” So, at least at first, the eyewitnesses to the Story, did not even tell the Story. It was too awesome and mysterious for human speech. So much for the Good News at the tomb, with the beautiful young man saying, “tell the disciples.” The story ends, with fear, and no comforting resurrection appearance of Jesus to help us out. But maybe a clever storyteller is at work here. No story about death and resurrection could possibly have a neat and tidy ending.

We tell ourselves stories to make sense of a changing world. We ask and answer questions this way. Then we weave ourselves into the story line, and find out who we are. Carolyn Heilbrun, a feminist and literary critic once wrote, “Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told.” Today, on this Easter morning we have decided to tell the story of three frightened women and what they found on a morning in a garden. We will see what kind of power flows from the telling.

Of course, we know that the silence of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome didn't last. We know it because here we are on Easter morning. We know it because fear and trembling were changed to courage and eloquence. We know it because these women and other disciples went to Galilee and beyond Galilee and kept talking. They wouldn't shut up, once they got started.

I believe the story of the women who were the last at the cross and the first at the empty tomb. They starting telling stories of power in a world where death seemed strong, where good men die, where the empire seemed invincible, where stones did not move. And not just telling stories: living the stories in ways that challenged the status quo.

So by the time Acts, was written, a couple of decades later, clearly the disciples **had** got the Good News; this proves that, eventually, the Marys and Salome spoke up. The Acts version is a more polished, organized story: baptism, ministry, death, resurrection, and the mission of the apostles. It all made more sense with the distance of time, just as when we look back at a story from our childhood, we can put it into some framework or perspective.

It seems that every time I read one of these old, old stories, no matter who is telling it, I see something new. Today it hit me from Acts 10: 39: “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.” Curious phrase. Under the Law of Moses, those who were hanged on a tree were cursed. There was something horrific about it. And my mind went to our more recent history, to when other men were taken and unjustly hung on trees. In other words, the lynching tree.

So here is another story: back in 1906, on the day before Easter, 3 African-American men were taken by a mob from a prison in Springfield Missouri. The men had been accused - wrongly, it turned out - of a murder and a rape. The crowd took them and hung them from a tower in the town square – a tower crowned by a statue of liberty. Just as in our crucifixion story, there were 3 men - Will Allen, Horace Duncan and Fred Coker –and they lost their lives in an all-too-common frenzy of prejudice and violence. Fear was the primary, immediate reaction in the Springfield African-American community, just as with the Marys and Salome. Almost overnight, Springfield’s thriving black community left town. Someone in the white community decided to celebrate the event by producing commemorative bronze coins, which said, on one side, “Souvenir of the hanging of 3 n____,” and on the other, “Easter Offering.” Easter offering. Who gets to tell that story? The African Americans told it by flight; the victors told theirs with souvenirs.

This is all to say that Good Fridays keep happening, each with its own particular details, but with a horrible sameness of systemic oppression, violence, and fear. But crucifixion in general means little until it is recognized in the particular. Each person reacts to each story in their own way, and each person gives witness in their own way and in their own time. There was no single response to the crucifixion. Each person struggles to create a story that makes sense...and maybe, if we are fortunate, to make healing out of trauma.

To those of us who show up in church today, Good Friday is not the last word. Those in power, in Jerusalem or in Springfield, lost control of the narrative. In one case, in the 1st century, there was an empty tomb and wild reports of angels ...and the claim of resurrection. In the other, in the 20th century, though it seems to have taken longer, there was a movement, the civil rights movement and then the Black Lives Matter movement. There were boycotts and marches and the claim of equality, the call to goodwill between races. We are still in the midst of that story. But each time we take a stand or raise a voice against racism we participate in a resurrection of sorts. We say that people did not suffer in vain, and that evil will not have the last word. We get to tell an Easter story.

In that sense, resurrection isn’t a conclusion, an ending to the story. It’s an invitation. It invites us to a strange kind of hope.

The African American theologian James Cone wrote:
“... the lynching tree...needs the cross, without which it becomes simply an abomination. It is the cross that points in the direction of hope, the confidence that there is a dimension to life beyond the reach of the oppressor. ...Though the pain of Jesus’ cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless. God’s loving solidarity can transform ugliness—whether Jesus on the cross or a lynched black victim—into beauty, into God’s liberating presence. “

The resurrection does not erase suffering: it teaches us to live in a world torn by suffering and injustice. It gives us hope that God is present in the worst violence of human life, and that God engages us in human history to create meaning on the other side of tragedy and wrongdoing.

The tragedy of innocent suffering is the force behind the meaning of resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection cannot be divorced from his death; it is significant precisely because it is a divine

response to human violence. The resurrection symbolizes God's intention for life to survive beyond violent disruption.

Here is some Easter Good News for you, though I am almost too afraid and too awestruck to say it: The resurrection is not something that happened years ago in a Judean garden. Resurrection is action taken now.

Howard Thurman, was a African American philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. His theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists, and he was a key mentor to leaders within the movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1944, Thurman co-founded the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States. And he tells us:

“Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.”

The story remains unfinished. The women run off in fright. They don't tell anyone about their experience at the tomb. But, the story does get told. We're here. We're celebrating Easter. Somehow the women moved beyond their fears, though more likely it was Jesus who met them and the other disciples. More likely they felt Jesus embrace them with the faithfulness that we call God. So yes, Easter is here. Good Friday did not have the final word. Life wins. Death loses its sting, and with it our fears.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.