

Isaiah 65: 17-25
I Corinthians 15: 20-26
Luke 24: 1-12

Perplexed
March 27, 2016 – Easter Sunday
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I once heard a preacher say: “If you don’t find resurrection hard to believe, you probably aren’t taking it very seriously!” Many of us here might be reassured by this thought, as we celebrate the impossible once again, at Easter. The familiar old perplexing story, told in a scant 12 verses in the Gospel of Luke, is easier to dismiss with our rational minds than to believe with our tired and bruised hearts. So let’s delve into the story a bit with our senses, and try to imagine our way into the reality of it.

“At early dawn, they came to the tomb.” It was twilight, with a grayish, rosy tinge in the sky to the east. A line of light was forming on the horizon, but a few stars still winked in the west. The ground under their sandals was a little wet with dew; the hems of their robes soaked up the moisture and clung to their ankles. The cool morning air made them draw their cloaks a little tighter around their heads. They didn’t really want to be seen, anyway. It was partly the fear, partly the grief. Their faces were drawn, betraying their belief that yesterday would always be better than tomorrow. Their eyes were red and dry with weeping, their throats were raw, but they kept swallowing new tears. They were exhausted, but trying to focus on the task at hand: this one last task, one last gesture of tenderness, of affection, of respect. Carefully hold the jars of ointment, don’t trip, but hurry, the roosters are beginning to crow. The crowded city is waking up, we won’t be alone much longer.

Five women at early dawn. Two named Mary, one named Joanna, the others un-named: maybe a Susanna or a Martha. We try to imagine their feelings, their thoughts. Who were they, to feel compelled to visit the tomb of a criminal? What brought them here?

Luke tells us that several women were part of Jesus’ circle of friends. They were women of means, and they provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their resources. So they were followers and they were caregivers; they were disciples and they were friends. But so little is said of them that we have to use our powers of imagination to bring them to life. So: these women were exhausted. The week had been too long. The tension and the grief were too much. On the day before the Sabbath, the world had come to an end...and yet they were still living. They had seen the dead body of their beloved teacher and friend put in the grave. And with him went joy, went love, went hope.

Luke tells us that on the day of the crucifixion, these women watched everything that happened. They witnessed a death. Then, shortly afterwards, they witnessed a burial. An ending. A great big “NO” from the universe, from the Romans, from the powers that rule the world. What do you do in the face of such a crushing word, when the structures that holds your universe together collapse? Well, they were still women, they were still caregivers. They went home and prepared spices and ointments so that burial could be completed after the Sabbath rest. Somehow they survived that “NO” and went on with the tasks of living.

Sometimes on Easter we jump quickly to the joy, the certainty of new life. This is a day for flowers, for sunlight, for singing. But let's linger a moment at early dawn. What was on Mary's, or on Joanna's mind? All the friendship, all the care-giving, all the love of several years had come to an end on that Friday noon. Jesus had affirmed the value of their lives over and over again, and now...who were they without his presence? Just five more suffering, silent, defeated women. Maybe they felt that they had nothing left to lose, risking themselves by association with a dead criminal. The finality of their friend's death was so clear, so obvious. This, strangely enough, was the frame of mind of the first people to experience resurrection.

None of the Gospels try to describe or depict the moment of resurrection itself. Instead, the stories show moments of realization. In the 12 verses read today, no one actually **saw** the risen Jesus. But, something was different. Something was strange here. The women were perplexed. The grave was open. The grave was empty. No, not empty, it is full of voices. Voices with some kind of impossible good news. "He is not here. He is risen"? Somehow, just after dawn, these despairing women had a flash of insight: death could not end or contain the love of Jesus the Christ. The tomb was empty, it did not "contain" Jesus. They were still loved and affirmed by him in some new and mysterious way.

This might sound like an "idle tale". The men who followed Jesus certainly thought so. It must have sounded a little hysterical, a little crazy. In the harrowing hours of "Good Friday," the men had not stood quite so close to the cross. They had a little more to lose, perhaps. They had not spent the time in the hands-on preparation of a body for death. Perhaps the women's experience of Friday and Saturday was a little more physical, a little more visceral. For some, that might make their stories **less** believable. For others, it gives them a depth of credibility.

I have had many conversations with people over the years about how to interpret the Bible. Many people have trouble with literal interpretations. They would like to have a text that they can trust, and they are pretty sure that the Gospels are not reliable accounts. There are certainly contradictions in the four Gospel accounts of Easter. Sometimes it's just a word, sometimes it's a difference in timing, sometimes it's whether an angel spoke or not. Today I want to affirm the value of doubt, of questioning. Questioning at least implies an interest, an engagement with the matter at hand. Some people, though, are almost offended by the stories, so obviously told by people who are willing to bend the truth. But I look for a different level of truth in these stories. I can't read them as journalism or a scientific record. I am looking for a truth felt in the gut, the kind of truth that I can see and use and apply in my own messy and "early dawn" life. So I go looking for real life analogies to the truths of Easter. I look for other times when God says "Yes" in answer to the world's "No."

My father died almost 25 years ago, when my daughter Elizabeth was less than four years old. Her memories of him are dim, and they all date from the time of his illness. In fact the diagnosis of his final illness almost exactly coincided with her birth. But I know, because my memories are quite clear, that she was so precious to him. I have a hundred pictures in my mind of them together. So now when I speak to her of him, I can't bring myself to say, "Your grandfather loved you so much." Deep down in my bones, I know that the truer statement is, "Your grandfather **loves** you so much." Present tense. That love lives; she and her brothers were formed by it; in some fashion they are still being formed; it still has meaning and power. A transformation happened at his death, but his love for them continues as an enduring affirmation.

When the five women ran from the tomb in excitement, they were tingling with the power of the love of Christ. It was shocking, in some ways frightening, in some ways energizing. It was so strong that it had survived the cross and struck them as a physical reality. "He is not here": against all odds, he is not in the tomb. His love is now available in all places and times, even through the experience of death.

This was indeed a new heaven and a new earth, as prophesied by Isaiah: a new creation illuminated by an experience of victorious love. Good Friday shows us the vulnerability of love. Easter Sunday shows us the power of love.

Each time the world says "NO" to virtue, to compassion, to justice, to peace is another Good Friday. We watch it happen, as those five women did, whether we're sitting in front of the evening news, looking out on our own neighborhood, or sitting at a bedside. We mourn, we feel helpless, and sometimes angry. But some of you continue to be caregivers, to nurture and honor the goodness that seems to die. We prepare ourselves, and then venture out in the early dawn. We make that journey to the tomb, because that is where we may hear God speaking the word, "YES". We are looking for that moment of realization, that flash of insight. Faith sustains us in our anticipation of that time.

Each time mercy overcomes prejudice, the world's "NO" is overcome by God's "YES". Each time that a broken relationship, past mending, saying "No, this won't work", is struck with the possibility of a reconciliation, a transformed relationship, that says "Yes, there is a way to move forward in love," the world's "NO" is overcome by God's "YES". Each time an act of oppression or violence shouting "NO" to the victim, is countered by peacemaking and justice, God shouts "YES" right back.

It turns out that Easter is happening all around us, on every day of the year. Those moments of realization are available to us. Even when, or maybe especially when, our frame of mind is fearful and sad, we can have those flashes of insight. Informed by the faith of those five women, who experienced the love of God in new and surprising ways 2,000 years ago, we listen for God's Word of affirmation. In our church covenant, we say that we will strive to "be doers of the Word, and not hearers only." So maybe this is **our** caregivers task: to be co-workers with God in all the ways one might say "YES" to the goodness in our world.

At early dawn we come to the tomb. Buried there is compassion, healing, justice, mercy, love. We may be fearful and tentative. We may feel like such a small group of friends in a hostile city. But let's make our way there anyway. I want to feel the presence of Christ. I want to feel that affirmation of love. I want to hear God's perplexing, extravagant, loving Word, "YES."

Amen.