

Jeremiah 31: 1-6
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28: 1-10

Reformulating All Possibilities
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
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The story of Easter is told over and over again: every year we gather here to hear one account of the story from one of the four Gospels. We almost get used to it, which is a mistake. We can't take it for granted. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has said that, in this story, God through Jesus is making us "reformulate all possibilities of power and powerlessness." That's his rather intellectual phrase. Our minds should be bending this morning. First of all, they should be bending because it is spring, and the world is springing alive. The natural world (as we call it) is doing its natural mind-bending thing. There's a little poem by Piet Hein:

We glibly talk of nature's laws
But do things have a natural cause?
Blackearth becoming yellow crocus
Is undiluted hocus-pocus.

Hein was a Danish scientist...I'm not sure who translated the original Danish words into "hocus-pocus." Another scientist, Neil deGrasse Tyson, says, "The cosmos ... is stranger than we ever could have imagined. Light, time, space, gravity conspire to create realities which lie beyond human experience." MIT physics professor Max Tegmark recently wrote about a new discovery about the Universe: "It teaches us humans that we need to think big," he says, "because we are the masters of underestimation." So say all the scientists.

So I suggest that what we have in front of us this morning is a Big Story, with a capital B, which we tend to underestimate...maybe because we don't really want to reformulate any possibilities, especially not about systems of power. We have a story that makes a bridge between the natural world and something "stranger than we ever could have imagined." We have a story that makes a bridge between human beings, a bridge between tragedy and new life, between yearning and delight.

This is the story: a man dies a terrible, tragic death. Even 2,000 years ago, it would have been considered horrific. But we have to admit that horrific deaths, even crucifixions, were not uncommon in the first century. So this one death, though of course important in its moment, was not enough to make the story a Big Story. It would have been part of the tapestry of human drama, one little thread: the unjust death of a noble man. A crushing blow to his followers and loved ones, but not beyond their imaginations, certainly not "black earth becoming yellow crocus."

In the months leading up to that Friday, Jesus himself had talked about his own death, the possibility of crucifixion. Those who knew him best refused to listen. They couldn't hear it. And if they tuned **that** out, they certainly did not grasp any of his talk of resurrection. How could they? Who could comprehend it? It was too big and too good to wrap their heads around. Too good to be true. And so they spent three days in grief, fear, devastation and confusion.

We might say that, for the disciples, the crucifixion was too bad to be true and the resurrection was too good to be true. Even though the former is not actually a saying. We don't need to be convinced about the power of bad; we do seem to underestimate the power of good.

What seems clear from the story in Matthew is that no one saw it coming. They were prepared for the new normal, which was fear and loss. The men were hiding and the women were, according to Matthew, up and about early "to see the tomb." These women had watched the death and the burial, helpless to do anything but observe. Those horrible images were etched on their hearts. The men, apparently, had just heard about it, but that was enough. None of them seemed to expect resurrection. They already knew the structures of power and powerlessness; they had run out of possibilities. But the Big Story says, in Matthew's account, that what happens next is an earthquake. I like that. Only an earthquake could wake them up from the stupor of grief: they needed some shaking up. They needed to be woken up to hear the words from an angel: "He is not here; go and tell the others; Jesus has gone ahead of you."

So, this earthquake of an announcement, this Good News, sends the women running. The story says that they left the tomb with a powerful sort of ambivalence: "quickly, with fear and great joy." Fear and joy, because these women have just woken up to the possibility that love is stronger than death. They have just begun to imagine the possibilities of something new and beautiful being created out of apparent destruction and pain. They have just begun to reformulate something in their minds and hearts: is it possible that what we thought was the most powerful force around, the Roman Empire, those who would oppress and degrade all who stood in their way... is it possible that something stronger just showed up? Wonderful as Jesus was, did we just underestimate who and what he was?

While they were running, an earthquake of another sort: Jesus meets them and speaks two beautiful words. One is the greeting. In our Bibles it says "Greetings!" but the word is *chairete*, which means "Be happy!" He doesn't start with "Fear not!" – no the first word out of the mouth of the risen Christ is Joy. The second beautiful word is "my brothers." The Marys are sent to the disciples, those same disciples who ran and hid and betrayed and who still cower in fear, with a word of forgiveness and love: "You are still my brothers."

They have to begin reformulating all the possibilities of sorrow and guilt and punishment. The women become the first heralds not only of the resurrection message, but also actors in the reconciliation story. This had little to do with believing that a dead body came back to life. It turns out that the soldiers and the priests believed this as well, and were quick to do a cover up. The power of the resurrection is knowing that this event heals a relationship between you and God. It is the understanding that you are a "brother" or "sister" being summoned to go and share the good news with others. It is about action more than belief: how the awareness of that deep love and healing changes the way you live.

Reformulating the possibilities: when we learn from the Marys how we can be agents of reconciliation, we are allowing Easter to shape "how" and not just "what" we believe. Easter means you have another chance to grow in divine likeness, and you can start doing that at any moment, even after you think it's too late. The disciples whom Jesus called "brothers" and "sisters" learned that it was never too late. This is "how" of believing. We are transformed by the resurrection when we recognize the possibilities for redemption and reconciliation that happen every day. We believe in the resurrection by making those moments happen.

Reformulating all possibilities: In the first century, women were not allowed to testify in court. They were not considered reliable witnesses. But here we are, year after year, telling the Big Story, in which women are the first people to wake up and tell the news. Nobody knows the names of those sleeping guards – the ones with the weapons and the might of the Empire at their backs – but we fondly remembers those Marys. Now 2000 years later, they are the ones we honor.

Of course, this was not terribly obvious at the time. In that week, in Jerusalem, it sure looked like the Romans were winning. The next day, Caesar and Herod were still in power. But somewhere, in a garden and in a dark room, a few people were transformed and reformulating. A few people were beginning to rethink the power of love.

That first Easter pointed the first Christians to ways of grasping “realities which lie beyond human experience,” and within human experience, to new visions of nature and its possibilities, and a larger vision of God's work in the world. Many people struggle with supernatural understandings of resurrection. But what of the Big Story of resurrection is not about a violation of the cause and effect laws of nature, but a revelation of the deeper energetic realities of life? The writer Mary Gordon says, “The meaning of the Resurrection is the possibility of possibility. The great perhaps. Perhaps: the open-endedness that gives the lie to death. That opens up the story.”

This is a story we need to live into, to translate into action, to read into our small resurrections of love and joy and understanding and peace. The Big Story calls to us, telling us that the risen Christ is out ahead of us, that he has been let loose in the world. He is out ahead of us, reformulating all possibilities of power and powerlessness, until we discover a future beyond intolerance and poverty and retribution and war. Jesus goes ahead of us into a future that is not constrained by death or grief or loss. Jesus goes before us into a future of peace and love, justice and truth, restoration and reconciliation.

Listen to the Big Story, and don't underestimate its power. Let it transform you, so that the future may be healed. Amen.