

Easter Day
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The Resurrection is Messy

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20:1-18

It took me more than a few Easter Sunday sermons to come around to honest admission and realization that nothing I could say about this day -- the Empty Tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other disciple's reaction -- nothing I could say about the Resurrection was novel or new. It has all, in one way or another, been written and said before. And yet that still doesn't get the preacher off the hook, because this day is the most important day of the year in our faith.

In the past I've reflected on the wonder and the mystery. I've championed the "proclaim it don't explain it" school of Easter preaching, for we don't know how the Resurrection happened but can come to believe why it happened and that why is anchored in God's love. I preached about new life and change and new possibilities and letting go of what holds us

down. How joy and tears can be close companions as we live and lose and grieve. When we were forced to go online for Easter Day 2020 at the beginning of the Pandemic my pithy sermon was titled: A Zoomed, not Doomed Easter. (I was quite proud of that one).

And then I can across a random blog post with the title: "Resurrection is Messy." And I thought: how so?

A teenager's bedroom could be called messy, your garage or basement can be messy, how can the heart of the Christian faith be described that way?

What do we hear again in today's account from John.

After being told by Mary Magdalene that the body of Jesus was missing, Peter and the other disciple ran as fast as they could, and upon arriving they find the tomb empty. They entered in and they looked around and all that was left was linen that was wrapped around Jesus' head.

They came, they didn't see what they expected to see – Jesus's body had been wrapped with spices in a linen cloth and laid in a new tomb in a garden. And then they returned home. Confused. Discouraged. Afraid.

Managing expectations is a constant in our lives. Many come to church – our church I hope – expecting to be welcomed, inspired, encouraged, and challenged, and not turned away, put down, or shamed. Many go into marriages expecting them to play out in a certain way – till death do us part. We can hope that a new job will be fulfilling, or at least resemble what the job description advertised. [Sports fans in the Boston area expect all four of our major sports teams to win championships every year.]

What happens when we fail to find something or someone we are looking for? It can either shake us or push us to search deeper and wider.

When we look for support and understanding from family and friends, and the response is underwhelming. It happens.

When we need some love and attention, others close to us might be distracted and even uncaring.

When we want to be given the benefit of the doubt but are met with distrust and suspicion.

How do we move forward?

Hear again the wisdom of the prayer of St. Francis that always re-centers me:

Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

We can learn and grow to respond to anger with more kindness. To hostility with awareness, to frustration with a bit more patience on our better days.

As we go deeper into faith -- live out our lives -- we can at least hope that things get clearer with time. We put our trust in God, we say our prayers and we can try to lead lives more in the light than in the shadows. To add more sweet than sour to the world. And still hardship, and trials and loss, and grief enter can enter in and can shake us to our core. What do we do then? Where do we turn?

More and more people of faith today are shaking off the reigns of so-called institutional religion and are searching for truth in different ways.

We are ALL fellow pilgrims – searching and longing.

All that I can say, and most of what I know, is that faith without the support of community can be lonely and unrooted way to find peace and support.

The risen Christ did not just come to one or two of his followers that first Easter morning. We hear from St. Paul in 1 Corinthians that after appearing to the twelve “he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, and then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

He was present with many others to bid them peace. He spoke again about the need to forgive. He stood on a beach near a fire in the early morning and invited the group from Galilee fishing by the sea to “Come and have breakfast.”

When the risen Christ appeared to his disciples, he did not look the same. But he still carried the scars of his death. “Look at my hands and my feet.”

Maybe that is why the Resurrection can be called messy. Celebrating the power and mystery of this day doesn't magically make all of the problems of the world go away. It does not bestow on us perfect lives. It alone cannot bring an end to wars, give food to those who are hungry, and stop refugees from fleeing for safety.

The Resurrection alone doesn't shield us from pain or heartache or loneliness or even doubt. You and I carry our own histories, our joys and disappointments, our loves and losses, into the present and onto the future.

What it does say to us is that suffering, and death is always met with God's love.

Something happened outside for walls of the ancient city of Jerusalem in a garden that changed the world we know. It set into motion a movement that continues today.

Join the work of the Gospel. Move out into your world, your home, your work, your schools, the larger world, and be the light and shines stronger than darkness. Tell the

world that all is not lost, for we have been found and embraced forever by a God who sent his son to live, heal, teach, suffer, die and be raised for us.

Becoming an Easter people is not about forgetting what has happened. It is about moving forward in hope.

Let the prayer of St. Francis get the final word today:

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.