

Interrupting the Natural Course of Things

Easter Sunday

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Texts: Acts 10.34-43;
Psalm 118;
Colossians 3.1-4;
John 20.1-18

It is so good to be here. Isn't? It's been a long winter. A brutal winter that never seemed to end. And we're not 100% sure that it has. But it is good to have arrived here on Easter Sunday. The flowers are beginning to bloom, the sun is finally shining. You can feel the weight of this long winter finally lifting with the hope of spring. I'm grateful today for the rhythms of the seasons; for the in-folding of winter and the unfolding of spring.

The seasons of Lent and Easter mirror that rhythm. Lent begins with the call to inward reflection and leads us through six long weeks of soulful examination. It's good to be together today to share in the joy of Easter day as we feel the unfolding of a new season before us. That's how we enter Easter morning: Alleluias bursting forth; trumpets sounding; choirs singing; full of life and hope and joy.

That is not how the first Easter morning begins. Not as John tells it to us. Mary Magdalene wakes before the sun. If there were flowers blooming she would not have seen them. She had a single focus in her mind one she held for days. To get the broken and battered, dead body of her Lord and friend and to honor his body in the way he deserved to be honored. I suspect she was in a fog the way that grieving people often are. Seeing and hearing very little of what is around her. The trauma of the days before left her in a daze.

Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You've been there. Maybe you are still there. Some diagnosis, some tragic death or broken promise has left you walking around in a haze. Moving through life, functioning, but not really present. Not really seeing. The pain that you

carry in times like these is palpable. Heavy. The seasons might be changing; winter turning toward spring but not for you. Not in your heart.

And even if you do not find yourself in that space right now, you can imagine those who are. The news is full of people in this place. Another random shooting on a military base a few weeks ago, a ferry that sank in South Korea leaving hundreds of people still missing, a startling report of anti-Semitism rising up in the Ukraine....I could go on. People left reeling from the pain of death and loss. Betrayal , shock, violence.

These are the images Mary carries with her as she looks for Jesus' body that first Easter morning. It's no wonder she does not recognize him when he stands alive before her. She was with the women who watched Jesus being tortured. They heard his anguished cries, saw him take his last breath, observed the soldiers take his lifeless body down from the cross, and witnessed the brave & kind man who claimed his body and laid him in a tomb. The natural course of things is for his body to be in that tomb three days later!

But on that first Easter morning some mysterious power was at work; a power that Mary could not, at first, even see. In the course of conversation with the man she took to be the gardener, the possibility of resurrection life began to dawn on her. She discovered something we have all come here today to remember, to claim for ourselves - the power of resurrection life. It is a power that can interrupt the natural course of things. When the leader of a movement who claims to be ushering in a new kingdom is brutally murdered, the natural course of things is for his followers to disperse and for the experiment to fade. But that's not what happened. The power of resurrection life began moving among them. It started with Mary here in the graveyard but moved to the house in Emmaus to an upper room in Jerusalem to the sea side of Galilee and from there moved outward around the globe and forward through time to this place and to our lives.

They might not have expected this, they may not have seen it coming but looking back we can see how Jesus was interrupting the natural course of

things from beginning to end. We can trace it just through the stories we read in Lent. At every point along the way, he turned what was typical, expected, and inevitable on its head. And for those who thought his theology of “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies” was the theoretical ramblings of an idealist, just watch him offering that love and forgiveness to his enemies as he is hanging on the cross about to die. When we look back we can see the power of resurrection life at work in him from the very beginning.

What Easter is about is offering to Jesus’ disciples both then and now the opportunity to finally see that resurrection life at work and to take hold of it for ourselves. The natural course of things is for death to be the end; for fear to breed violence; for despair to completely overwhelm all hope. What Easter shows us is that the power of God can interrupt what seems inevitable. This is the power of resurrection life and I have seen it in living color.

Two weeks ago the New York Times magazine ran an article that has been haunting me ever since. It is perhaps one of the most compelling stories and visual images of resurrection life at work than I have seen in a long time.¹ It’s been 20 years since the genocide in Rwanda that killed nearly a million people. A national effort has been underway to bring reconciliation and peace to the people who experienced the horror of that time. The article shares photographs. In each one there is a Hutu perpetrator who was granted pardon by the Tutsi survivor of his crime. With each photo comes the remarkable story of each person’s experience. In some photos you can see the psychic scars of what has transpired but equally evident is the peace they had found. With each story I felt a visceral sense of hope that God’s promise to bring peace to our world, to redeem and to save us, is trustworthy and true. When I think about what makes this story so gripping it is the way in which forgiveness and hope has interrupted the typical cycles of bitterness and revenge. It’s one thing to hear the story of Jesus, the Son of God, offering forgiveness from the cross. It’s another to

¹ See the full article and photographs at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html?_r=0

see a perfectly ordinary person finding their way to stand in the same room with the person who murdered their whole family, in some cases. It's astounding to me. And it gives me hope that there really is life beyond death; that love is stronger than fear, and that there is hope when everything seems to be lost.

There is one more piece of good news I want to highlight from our passage for today. In the gospel of John, the power of resurrection life does not immediately dawn on each disciple. Some take time to understand what all of this talk of resurrection means. It isn't instantaneous. There's a reason we take seven weeks to celebrate Easter. And a reason we circle back to this season year after year. It's not the natural course of things to look into empty tombs and assume resurrection. We have to let God's Spirit work within us, convincing us of this good news: shaping our responses, challenging our typical reactions, reforming our desires so that we can begin to move through the world expecting resurrection.

Perhaps that could be our Easter discipline - to look for examples, and to tell stories that point to the power of resurrection at work here, now, in my life and in yours. And not just stories of the extraordinary like the one I read in the NY Times but simple, every day moments where we look for the new life that God is making possible.

Wendell Berry in his piece, *Manifesto*, offers this advice:

"Friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Love someone who does not deserve it. Plant sequoias. Laugh. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. Practice resurrection."

We need to practice resurrection. It's not the natural course of things....so thank God for Easter - thank God for this time to remember once again the truth of our lives: Jesus Christ is Risen. Alleluia! Amen.