

Layers of Resurrection

Easter Sunday

John 20: 1-22

When my spouse was in kindergarten, her father got a phone call from her Kindergarten teacher. Turns out the teacher was concerned because Joy was coloring all her pictures using only dark colors. Rainbows. Puppies. Trees. All in deep purples and shades of gray and black. So her father explained that a few months earlier her mother had died from cancer, and that she was processing and working out her grief. Grief's darkness finds ways to sneak out, doesn't it? Mary Magdalene is walking to the tomb of her friend, *while it was still dark*. The grief sneaking out of her. In the dark is how the beginning of the resurrection story is colored as well.

We know darkness well. Death. Injustice. Sorrow. The lingering dark purples and grays which can color our days. We've all been through it before. It's the part of life's journey we wish wasn't there. But ironically, it is the starting place if we are to get to resurrection. Go a little deeper and under the surface the gospel is saying something else as well. "In the beginning the earth was formless and dark." Creation always begins on a dark note. So, we are invited to read the story of resurrection as a creation story. Or rather a "new creation" story which begins on the eighth day, the first day of the week. Full of grief and confusion, inside of the darkness.

But watch what happens next. Pay attention to the brilliant artistry of layers unfolding as the characters begin to make sense of what has happened to Jesus. Mary arrives in the dark, but she notices something is wrong—the stone has been rolled away. So she makes an assumption about what has happened—something we all do when we don't know all the facts. "Someone has taken the Lord and moved the body!" So she runs back to tell the disciples to which Peter and the nameless Beloved Dude run to the tomb—you know typical guys trying to take control stuff. But the Beloved Dude is in better shape so he shows up first. He sees the stone rolled away that Mary saw, plus he looks into the tomb. He sees the linens used to wrap the body set aside—which is strange. If someone has taken the body, why would they go through the trouble of unwrapping it? It doesn't make sense.

Now it's Peter's turn. Whereas the Beloved Dude simply looks into the tomb, Peter enters into it. He sees the linens plus he notices another clue: the veil used to cover the face. Except it's neatly folded in the corner—who robs a tomb and then folds the laundry? It's an odd puzzle to piece together. But notice the layers: Mary sees the stone. The Beloved Dude looks into the tomb. Peter walks in, each of them noticing something new and discovering something else. Resurrection is discovered and processed in community as we see happening here.

Then it tells us the disciples seeing these things believed...except it also says they didn't understand that Jesus had been raised from the dead. So whatever they believed they didn't fully understand. Resurrection is a layering process of discovery, like a moment we can look back upon and say, "of course" when in the moment it made no sense at all.

But here's where things get juicy and something radical takes place. After the disciples leave, Mary stays behind to weep. And then *she looks in the tomb* and sees the linens and the napkin, and something else: two angels—one sitting at the head, the other at the feet. Ah-ha, another

clue! You see, inside the Holy of Holies there were two cherubim on either side of what was called the Mercy Seat, which is where God's presence sat. So the layer we are seeing here is that Mary is looking into both an empty tomb *and an empty Holy of Holies*. Which raises the question: How can a container of death be holy? More, the tomb of someone who has just been brutally murdered by the political and religious institutions?

You see, yesterday—what we call Holy Saturday—was day seven. And what does God do on day seven? Spring festival! No, God rests. Except yesterday God rests in death which somehow makes death holy as well. How? Because wherever love dwells—whether it be in life or in death—it is a holy place and can't be separated from the love of God. This week, a friend posted the death of an activist in Seattle who died from gun violence. He was hanging out with his nine-year-old nephew. And when he realized what was happening, he shielded his nephew from the spray of bullets. He was 22 years young. Upon the news, the community gathered at the site. It became a place with candles lit, and songs hummed, and tears unleashed as they prayed. It transformed the landmark into a holy place where love's presence was palpable. Tombs are now fertile soil for God. And now God does in death what God always does: call forth life.

So as Mary looks into the tomb, she hears a voice behind her. She thinks he's the gardener—a reference to Adam—and Jesus calls out to her, "Mary!" She wants a hug, but no touching yet. So she runs home and is the first to deliver the good news to the disciples. Now here is where the Easter story usually ends. But if we stop here we know that resurrection happened, but still don't know what it means for us.

Except, later that evening, Jesus shows up to the disciples in the upper room. Remember he says "Peace be with you." Shows them his wounds. They rejoice, but still no meaning. So Jesus says it again, "Peace be with you. As God has sent me into the world, so I send you." And then Jesus breathes onto them. Except in the Greek he doesn't breathe onto them. *He breathes into them*. It is the same word as when God breathes life into the first humans in Genesis.

Jesus fills his disciples with the Holy Spirit. He fills them with his Spirit, which is the Spirit of someone who has been the victim of a great political and religious injustice. Someone who knows the rejection of family and friends. Yet, someone who forgives, and then occupies death and turns it into something creative and productive and transformative. Only the Spirit that ventilates the world with tender peace and forgiveness has any chance to change it. Like the African American community has done in the face of oppression countless times in our history. Like our partners, Triad Restorative Justice, does by putting the victim and victimizer together safely to transform both parties. Or like how the LGBTQ community did after a conservative church intentionally moved in next door to their night club to "convert" them. So, instead of feeling threatened, they sent the church invitations and flyers to their upcoming drag shows events! Examples of being in the world where the only power death and fear and violence hold, is the power we are willing to give to it.

And so it is here—finally—where we begin to see that resurrection isn't something that happened. It is something that happens to us as well. We have the same Spirit of creative power breathed into us. We belong to the next layer of the resurrection story. Where death is fertile soil

for God to do what God always does: calls forth life from even the darkest places in our world with the power of creative justice and transformative Love.

“As God has sent me into the world,” Jesus says, “so I now send you.” For only the Spirit who ventilates the world with tender peace and forgiveness has any chance to change it. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. He is risen! *He is risen indeed!*