

SLD04.16.06 Easter Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
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John 20:1-18

“The Story of Our Faith”

In the beginning...well really, way back *before* the beginning...before Creation, when there was only God and nothing else...God used to make up stories... you know, just to pass the time. Well...of course, time wasn't yet, either...so I guess we'd better say that God used to make up stories just for company. It's not easy to feel all alone in the universe. So, back during those looong, boring days of divine solitude, God was forever churning out complicated, convoluted, nigh on impossible stories, just for God's own pleasure - making up characters, spinning out dramas, rearranging endings...just for kicks. And, as might be expected over eternity, God began to favor some of those fantabulous tales over others.

For, truth be known, some of the stories issuing from the divine imagination were actually quite dull and predictable, causing God to feel grumpy and uninspired for millennia at a time. But others, especially the ones featuring complex characters and surprise endings, actually titillated the divine imagination, making God declare from time to time (to God's Self, of course), "I want more of *that!*"

Now, God's story of Creation happens to be one of those "I want more of *that!*" variety, for the ever-unfolding complex drama of Creation never failed to help God feel joyous and full of possibilities. Maybe that's because God's story of Creation wasn't just one story but many, many, *many* stories of the Beginning. Indeed, of *many* Beginnings. For as we all know, God tends to favor variety. And diversity. And surprises. Witness the roly polly. And the giraffe. And Eddie Murphy.

But, you know, it can get tiresome after a while if you're the only One laughing at your own jokes and stories. So, about half way through speaking the lengthy and fascinating Word of Creation, God decided to throw the mud of humankind onto the wheel to see if perhaps there might flourish creatures who could actually listen and enjoy and learn from God's stories as much as God did. Creatures whose own lives might reflect back to God the best of Creation's drama. Creatures whose 'free will' might even impact the drama itself and *alter* the way the story ends.

And so it was that, quite soon after the creation of humanity, people began picking up on God's stories, and spinning them in various directions according to their understandings, and drawing them on walls of caves, and teaching them to their children, and eventually, writing them down on paper and getting them published. I'm talking all *kinds* of stories about themselves and about God, about life and how it began, and what its purpose was, and how it was all going to work out in the end. And people found themselves enjoying these stories, and developing them, and really, coming to depend on them for understanding Life. In fact, whole communities were created by a shared commitment to the life truths revealed by certain stories, which, of course, is what God had in Mind in the first place.

But once in a while, you know, once in a while, a story would come along that was so nutty that, well...you just couldn't believe it. Not on your own, anyway. And if you couldn't believe it, well, you couldn't live by it. Couldn't be a part of a community that lived by it. And if you couldn't live by it, well, it just didn't have any meaning for you. So you'd just sort of forget it and, if you were lucky, maybe find other stories to live by. Or maybe not.

You take John's gospel story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for example. The one I just read. Now *that's* a nutty story. Jesus rising from the dead? I mean, come on. After all, Son of God notwithstanding, Jesus was a man, right? And, only three short days ago, a **dead** man. I mean *really dead*. I'm talking I can tell you for sure that last Friday, **nobody** around Jesus, not his friends, not his disciples, not even his own mother, believed for one minute that Jesus hanging on the cross, Jesus breathing his last breath, Jesus dismounted, shrouded, and laid in the tomb on Friday night, was anything but dead. The inescapable truth *that* day was that Jesus' life, that started so full of hope and possibilities, had ended in humiliation, suffering and death. And that, painful as it was to those who loved him, was that.

So when Mary comes to the tomb in the first scene from today's story, and sees the stone removed, and Jesus' body gone, what's she supposed to think? I mean, what's she supposed to think? What's the most obvious explanation? The most logical conclusion?

Why the one Mary draws, of course: that Jesus' enemies, probably intending further desecration to his body, have made off with his remains. And really, what *e/se* could explain the disappearance of his body?

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, reports Mary breathlessly to the other disciples, "and we do not know where they have laid him."

'They,' Jesus' enemies. 'They,' Jesus' persecutors. 'They,' the ones from whom the disciples still hide in fear. 'They' have stolen Jesus. What other explanation could there be?

When they hear Mary's news, Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, maybe James, maybe John, cannot, don't **want** to believe their ears. Surely Mary's mistaken. Surely she's been to the wrong tomb. Or maybe that early morning light was too dim to see. Or the aura of the emerging dawn – light does funny things in that part of the world. There has to be *some* other explanation for Jesus' disappearance. The other disciples race to see for themselves.

Right tomb. Good light. Shifted stone. Linen wrappings. No corpse.

There's no arguing with the evidence. Jesus' body is gone, sure enough.

Mary must be right - grave robbers.

You know, maybe somebody among Jesus' followers that day remembered what he'd said about the shepherd laying down his life for his sheep, or the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days...everybody loved Jesus' stories...but, you know, they were only stories. And push comes to shove, and...well...

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Shattered, demoralized, the men return home.

But there's a second scene in John story.

And in that second scene, Mary is again at the tomb, alone, weeping. The angels ask her, “why are you weeping?” The stranger asks her: “why are you weeping?”

Why don't they get it? “They've taken away my Lord!”

Why won't they leave her alone? Mary turns away.

Until the stranger speaks her name. “Mary!” “Mary!”

And something happens. Something shifts. Something....

Upon hearing her name, somehow Mary is called back.... Called back from her fear; called back from her grief; called back from her confusion.... Called back **to** herself, her faith, her wisdom, her Lord.

“Mary!” says the stranger. And somehow, Mary’s eyes are opened and she recognizes who stands before her. “Rabbouni” she exclaims, as she throws her arms around her beloved.

20th century French novelist, Marcel Proust, remarked that that “the real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.” The real act of discovery is in seeing with new eyes. When Jesus speaks Mary’s name, this is the grace he gives her - new eyes! New eyes to see what is before her. New eyes to see *into* what is before her. And, when Mary looks with her new eyes, what is her ‘real discovery?’ Why, the mystery and the power of the resurrection!

New Testament professor Gail O’Day puts it this way: she says that when Jesus calls Mary’s name, “the intimate and the cosmic conjoin.” As a ‘word nerd’ and closet mystic myself, that kind of language appeals to me - ‘the intimate and the cosmic conjoin.’ Writes O’Day, “through the intimacy of Mary’s name, the reality of the resurrection is revealed¹.” That’s Easter, do you see?

But here’s what I think is important for us 21st century, post-enlightenment, post-modern, emerging church Christians to note: in that sweet joining of the intimate and the cosmic, the resurrection is *revealed*. *Revealed*, not understood. That’s what I want you to hear. When the intimate and the cosmic conjoin, when one is given the grace to see with new eyes, the reality discovered is *experienced*, not grasped. *Witnessed*, not

de-mystified. Intimate/cosmic conjugation notwithstanding. Jesus' resurrection makes no more sense to Mary, or to any of the other disciples, for that matter, *after* they experience his resurrected self than it did *before*. In fact, even as Mary tries to embrace the Jesus she imagines is now back from the dead, he pushes her away. "Don't hold on to me, Mary." "I'm not who you think I am. I'm not *what* you think I am. I have not yet ascended. Don't hold me too tightly. Just go now, and share what you've seen (with your new eyes) and heard."

And so, just as at the beginning of Creation, once again "the intimate and the cosmic conjoin" through the speaking of a Word. And once the Word is spoken, Jesus' story, as well as Mary's place in it, is altered, shifted, adjusted, realigned.... And suddenly Mary **gets** it. Suddenly, with the grace of new eyes, Mary can laugh at the empty shell of the tomb. Suddenly, with the grace of new eyes, the empty tomb brings Mary joy. Suddenly, with the grace of new eyes, the empty tomb manifests to Mary the good news that Jesus is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Good story, huh? And Lord knows, we all love a good story. Like I said, God created us that way. On purpose.

But an empty tomb as a symbol of life? Even for those closest to Jesus, that was a pretty big stretch, never mind for us educated, post-enlightenment, post-modern Christians. I mean, really, what could be more **irrational** than a personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus?

Truth is, what God does on Easter morning categorically **defies** all rationality. It's no exaggeration to say that the resurrection of Jesus Christ violates every law, counters every rule, shatters every assumption, interrupts, breaks in, and categorically

¹ O'Day, Gail R. "John," The Women's Bible Commentary, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p.301.

disrupts every rational, mathematical, and scientific pattern of existence to which we hold dear.

Life/death; day/night, light/dark; winter/spring; start/finish – isn't *that* the objective, predictable, metrical drumbeat with which we are most familiar? As natural and neutral, as inexorable and reliable as the seasons themselves, and the rising and the setting of the sun? Day/night, light/dark; winter/spring; Life/death. Isn't *that* the reality we live by day to day?

And sure enough, stories from spiritual traditions all across the world and across time offer powerful symbolism to represent this familiar, reliable rhythm: Persephone emerging from the underworld; the snake at Chichen Itza shedding its skin; the butterfly, Psyche, struggling from its cocoon; a phoenix rising from the Incan sun.

Day/night, light/dark, life/death – the cycle of Life. Right?

Until God raises Jesus from the dead. Until God chooses to take what is dead, *really* dead - not hibernating, not dormant, not momentarily arrested or playing possum – but, totally, finally, full-out dead...and breathe life back into it.

And not just for a moment or a season or even for a lifetime, but for all eternity. Now *that's* a different story. Do you see? Because when God raises Jesus from the grave, God alters forever the fundamental rhythm of creation, from an even drone – day/night, light/dark, life/death - to a new meter - common but lyrical - an iambic pentameter: – night/**day**, dark/**light**, death/**life**.

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God messes (yet again) with the story of Creation by helping us see with new eyes, not the neutral, mechanistic, rational God of Nature, but a relational God defined by particularity and passion, a “situated” God as

the feminist theologians might say; a rule-breaking, story-changing, life-favoring God who chooses through Christ Jesus to tilt the rest of Creation toward Life, as well.

And how does God tilt the system toward life? Now that's another interesting story. Not by destroying Death, or denying it, or sidestepping it or softening it or diluting it in any way. But by reaching into the very womb of Death's desiccation, and wrenching through its clenched, collapsed birth canal the fruit of a seed of life that Death doesn't even know is there. Because, of course, it isn't there, until God plants it.

Recognize the story? You've heard it before. It's the story of the virgin birth, and before that, the story of creation itself – that unfathomable capacity of God's to create something out of nothing, with just a Word.

Remember how Genesis says that in the beginning of time, the earth was a formless void – “tohu wa vohu” in Hebrew – an empty, formless vacuum, of which we cannot even conceive because even our conception has no place in a vacuum? That's the formless void, the story goes, that's the beginning nothingness, from which God creates Something... by breathing a Word. And what comes into being when God breathes that first Word is Life itself, the Life that is the light of all people, the light that darkness can not overcome. (John 1:3) And the Word that God speaks is Jesus Christ.

And then, just three days after Jesus' death, God breathes a Word again, and this time the word is Mary's name. And Mary is given the grace of new eyes to witness and experience the resurrection of her beloved One.

And then, here just two thousand years after Jesus' death, God breathes a Word again, and this time the Word is your name. John. Tim. Lorraine. Doug. Nancy.

Lindy. Reed. And you, and I, are given the grace of new eyes to witness and experience the resurrection of our beloved One.

Indeed, every time God comes and breathes a Word, every time the 'intimate and the cosmic conjoin,' then once again, out of nothingness, out of the void, out of confusion and chaos and despair, comes Life. New life. Divine life. And a new beginning.

Intriguing? I think so. Rational? Hardly. In fact, if anybody claims to "understand" Jesus' resurrection, you don't believe 'em. But it makes for a great story, doesn't it? A joyous story, full of possibilities, that'll flat make a body say, "I want more of *that*."

Reckon God knew what God was doing when God wrote it?

Friends, this is God's gift to you and me this Easter morning - the grace of new eyes. New eyes, with which you and I might engage in an act of genuine discovery. New eyes with which you and I might see, witness, and experience, for ourselves the Truth of the resurrected Jesus that God places before us.

Listen...listen...listen...for *your* name on the lips of God, and see what happens. Chances are, you'll want more of *that*.

To the glory of God. Amen.