

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD: EASTER DAY (C) – April 17, 2022
Isaiah 65:17–25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14–24; 1 Corinthians 15:19–26; Luke 24:1–12
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Alleluia! Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

One of my colleagues at UMass Lowell is Susan Thomson Tripathy, a faculty member in the Department of Sociology. Over the years, we have worked together on a variety of projects. Last month, before a weekly meditation session led by another faculty member, I mentioned my sermon-writing endeavors for Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent – and that I was also on the schedule for Easter Sunday. Susan was reminded of a story written by her grandfather, Ralph Thomson, in his book, *A Shadow of Light*. In her grandfather's words:

The year was 1906. Spring came early that year and Easter late, April 22nd, just about as late as it could come.

...

Although we all went to church and Sunday School every Sunday, Easter was a very special day, quite different from the usual Sunday. Father appeared to be anxious to have a very good sermon, and had spent more time than usual upstairs in his study, away from the hubbub of family living, pounding out a sermon on his old typewriter which made a rumbling sound like a distant lumber wagon. This blended in with his mumbling to himself, for he was really preaching the sermon as he wrote it. No one ever questioned why he wrote a sermon that way. It was just assumed that that was the way to turn out a really good one. Sometimes, in the evening, after finishing a sermon, he would read it to mother to get her opinion of it. Since Palm Sunday was also of special

significance, father had been very busy for two weeks.
 [Ralph W. Thomson, *A Shadow of Light*, Vantage Press, 1976, pp. 167 - 168.]

Ah, yes! One hundred sixteen years later, there's still the pressure to have a "very good" sermon on Easter Sunday!

(I wonder: What *does* make a really good Easter sermon? And, what is the message that needs to be spoken *this* year? What is the word that needs to be heard on Easter Day 2022? What can be said today about having hope, finding joy, and experiencing wonder, when the world situation just seems to go from bad to worse?)

Easter - and all that it entails - can lead us to feel wonderment, astonishment, surprise, maybe even incredulity. Easter - with its story of resurrection - doesn't fit into neat little boxes. And it may leave us with more questions than answers.

Although, at least, the Easter greeting is always appropriate to repeat:

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

I wonder if in this current time and place all we *can* do is *but wonder*.

In order to get a true sense of the wonderment of this Easter day, then, let us first go back to the events preceding today's Gospel. Jesus has died from crucifixion - a most brutal and horrific mode of death. Jesus' acquaintances - including the women who have followed from Galilee - have stood at a distance, watching. Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus. Joseph takes the body down from the cross, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one has ever been placed. It is the day of Preparation, and the

sabbath is beginning. The women follow; they see the tomb and where Jesus' body is placed. They then return to prepare spices and ointments.

(I wonder: Is this preparation a task the women have done several times before? Do they mentally – and viscerally – replay over and over the events of this horrible death? Do they work quietly, each with their own thoughts, or do they share memories and favorite stories of Jesus even as they weep and mourn? And I wonder: What about for you? If someone you love has died, did you relive their last moments? As you touched their possessions or cleaned out their home or visited their gravesite, what memories of the person surfaced? As you planned a funeral or memorial service, was there any room for wonder or awe?)

Perhaps the women work quickly at their preparations, because, you see, on the sabbath, the women needed to stop to rest according to the commandment. But, *now*, on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they come to the tomb Joseph of Arimathea has prepared, bringing with them the spices they have readied. They have known how to watch, they have known what will be needed, they have known when to rest, and now they have known when to rise at dawn. [From "Daughters of Jerusalem", a reflection by Kathleen Reed written for the Good Friday service, April 19, 2019.]

Now, having risen at dawn, the women find the tomb, yes indeed they do – yet they *also* find that the stone has been rolled away. They enter the tomb expecting to find Jesus' body in the same location where it had been placed, but Jesus' body is no longer there at all. The women are, says Luke, perplexed. They are not angry, dismayed, or vexed; they are *perplexed*. How are they to make sense of the disconnect between what they expect and what they find? [Holly Hearon, "Commentary on Luke 24:1-12; Working Preacher, April 20, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/vigil-of-easter-2/commentary-on-luke-241-12-5>]

While the women are perplexed, another unexpected thing happens: Heavenly messengers appear suddenly right beside them. Now, they are not just perplexed, they are *terrified*!

(Here, I must pause as I wonder: If in Matthew's Easter story the angel says to the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid"; if in Mark's Easter story the heavenly messenger says to the women, "Do not be alarmed"; if, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the Angel Gabriel says to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary"; and if, also in Luke's Gospel, the angel says to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid"; then why don't the angelic messengers in Luke's Easter story tell the terrified women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid"??)

Here, today in Luke, the women do *not* hear "Do not be afraid"; they do *not* hear, "Do not be alarmed"; instead, the first thing they hear from the angels is a question. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" If today we were asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?", we might answer, "Because there are times in today's world when it is *imperative* to look for the living among the dead: for example, in the case of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, or floods; and in the case of terrorist attacks or within the destruction of war or after shooting incidents. The search for survivors is part of the rescue operation." But the reality is that the women at the tomb on Easter weren't looking for the *living* among the dead; they were looking for the *dead* among the dead.

(I wonder, then, on *this* Easter Sunday: Do *we* ever search for the Living One among the dead? Do *we* ever want to hang onto, to hold fast to, that which is familiar and comfortable – even though it may be constricting and not life-producing? Do we ever focus our attention on the aspects of ourselves or of our surroundings that are discouraging, distorted, oppressive, or

paralyzing? [*Homily Service*, March 1989, p. 66] And I wonder: Are there things we *need* to let die in order that we may *live*, to be fully alive? Do we need to let go of a broken relationship, of self-centeredness, of a low sense of self? Do we need to let go of a drive for perfection or of addictions in various forms?)

So, in Luke's gospel, the angelic messengers don't say to the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid"; instead, they ask about searching for the living among the dead. But they do then get to the Easter message, when they add, "Jesus is not here, but has risen."

And so, we echo the words of the angels when we say:

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

The angels then ask the women to *remember* – to remember how Jesus told them about being handed over to sinners and being crucified and on the third day rising again. And the women *do* remember Jesus' words – and, in remembering Jesus' words, they *also* remember Jesus. Jesus' words from the past become part of these women's lives in the present.

This remembering also extends to *us* – here – today – when later in the service we share the Eucharist. As we lift the bread and as we lift the cup, we hear the words, "Do this to remember me." In so doing, we *do* remember Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me." [Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25] This remembrance is *anamnesis*, the re-presentation of God's gracious acts in the past to make them present with us today.

So, the women leave the tomb, find "the eleven" and "all the rest", and tell their story. And we are finally told the women's names – well, at least the names of three of them – "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James"; "the other

women” remain nameless. **But their words seem to the apostles an idle tale, and the apostles do not believe them.**

Before the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, people of color, both free and slave, as well as Chinese in the West, were excluded as witnesses where a white person was a party.

[<https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1954&context=mlr>]

In commenting on today’s Gospel, Michael Joseph Brown notes: “The history of civil rights in the United States is replete with examples of women and men whose truthfulness was discounted or disregarded because an accident of birth made them something other than white men. In short, certain people throughout history, simply because of gender or ethnicity, have been branded deceitful and lacking in credibility for no other reason than prevailing social prejudices.”

[<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/vigil-of-easter-2/commentary-on-luke-241-12-4>]

(I wonder: If you’ve had an urgent story to tell, have you had listeners who believed *you*? How have you had your truth dismissed or denied? When have you been shut down or talked over? Have you ever been told not to tell anyone, to keep quiet? And I wonder, have you ever been the recipient of a story about someone that you found too troubling, too out-of-character, to be believed?)

To be fair, if the women’s message *doesn’t* fit with what the *male* apostles understood of reality, then their trying to comprehend this information could prove difficult. Might it not be the same for us here today? What are we to make of the Easter proclamation? Do we, as the poet Mary Oliver once said, “have trouble with the resurrection”? [*On Being*, March 31, 2022, <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-i-got-saved-by-the-beauty-of-the-world/#transcript>] Perhaps, in the words of Julia Esquivel, might we even feel “threatened with resurrection”?

Although the women's Easter sermon was not believed all those many years ago, at least some of their words penetrated through to one of the eleven, Peter, who has to check it out for himself; he gets up and runs to the tomb. Although he doesn't enter, he stoops low enough to peer in. He notices the linen cloths lying by themselves, then goes home, amazed.

(On *this* Easter morn, in 2022, I wonder: Does anything change for us when *we* come to the empty tomb? What *today* did we come expecting to find? Where do *we* look *today* for the signs of resurrection life? To whom can *we* share the good news of resurrection? Is there someone, whose abilities have faded or been forgotten, whom we could help, to channel their energies toward new creativity? Is there someone who could use a card or a telephone call or a virtual hug, to help rekindle faint hope?)

Gail Ramshaw, Lutheran scholar of liturgical language, notes that: "The Spirit of God, that is, the divine breath of life, is now in the church, and all that Christ did for the world is now the task of the church. Christ is not in the tomb: Christ is, rather, in the assembly, which is eating the bread and sharing the life of God with all the world." [Gail Ramshaw, "Resurrection of the Body", *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 340]

In the verse immediately following today's Gospel, we learn that Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene. Christ may also appear to *us* in the order of the liturgy, in the readings, in the hymns, in the exchange of peace, in the preached word, in the meal. Christ's empty tomb was the sign of life, of victory over death. "With Jesus risen from the dead, life suddenly takes on a new meaning and dimension." [Homily Service, March 1989, p 65] As one commentator has noted: "To look in the places of resurrection is to focus on the overcoming power of life and love that is the deepest reality of everything that is – even the things that are discouraging, distorted, oppressive or paralyzed." [Homily Service,

March 1989, pp 66-67] Pastor Andy Willis, who serves the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva, has said in an Easter sermon:

“Sneaking life into a tomb – *that’s* what Easter is all about! Easter is God whispering to us: ‘*Nothing* can keep my love in a grave.’”

[Quoted by Timothy Egan in *A Pilgrimage to Eternity: From Canterbury to Rome in Search of a Faith*, Viking, © 2019 by Timothy Egan, p. 161]

So, I wonder: What *does* make a very good Easter sermon? Perhaps it’s one that leaves us with more questions than answers, as it must have done for the women who went to Jesus’ tomb. Maybe it’s one that, while acknowledging the reality of grief and loss, of pain and suffering, of war and desolation – maybe it’s one that, nevertheless, invites us to pause in wonderment, to be open to moments of joy, to encourage each other in hope, and, through our lives, to join the women in bearing witness to a world in need. I know that *I* continue to ponder, that *I* continue to feel wonder and hope at all that is seen and felt and heard and known through the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. For now, it is enough to repeat:

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed!** Alleluia!