

Story and Meditation: You've Got to Do What You've Got to Do

April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18
by Eric Anderson

When he woke up. It was dark. I mean really dark. Not like the dark of night time, with moon and stars and lights outside. Not even like the dark of a cloudy moonless night, which still has some brightness in it. Not like the dark you see if you close your eyes, and when you turn your head you can still sense things getting darker or brighter. This was the darkness without any light at all.

It was a darkness that was enclosed. He reached all around and found he was inside something that was mostly smooth, and kind of damp in places. He suddenly felt it was time to get out, and he started to flail at the smooth surface, even butting at it with his head. His motions were so strong that he had the sensation of other movement around him, other creatures doing the same thing. He was his own private earthquake.

Suddenly the surface cracked, and he flailed away some more, pushing away fragments and almost swimming through an avalanche of soil. Suddenly light dazzled his eyes. He raised his head from the sand and looked up at a sky filled with stars. He looked out before him and saw the moon reflecting from a dancing ocean.

Around him other heads and flippers and shells emerged from the rippling sand. They set out for the glistening sea.

The honu hatchlings had emerged from deepest darkness to a completely new life.

Hatching isn't a resurrection, but it might just feel like one. Like Jesus' resurrection, it goes from deep dark to light, and it is usually hidden from the rest of the world.

Resurrection did not bring Mary Magdalene to the tomb that Easter morning. She came to grieve.

Grief is an inescapable part of human life. If we dare to love, we will also come to grieve. We love many things in this life that are temporary, that will come to an end. We love meals that always end in empty dishes. We love games that will eventually have a winner. We love projects that will be completed. We love trips that always return to home. We love homes from which we will probably move. We love jobs from which we will retire. We love people.

And people – like Jesus – die.

Mary was doing what she had to do. She'd come to remember her dear friend Jesus. She'd come to seek comfort for her sadness at the tomb. It was the closest she could come to him now.

In grief, we all have to do what we have to do.

Grief is the foundation of Easter. It's where it starts. It's just not where it ends.

In this moment, we find ourselves living in a circumstance of widespread grief. Some today mourn for someone who has died: a daughter, a father, an uncle, a co-worker, a friend. Many of these deaths have nothing to do with the COVID-19 pandemic, many others are a direct or indirect result. According to Wikipedia, there had been over 110,000 deaths from coronavirus disease. 20,000 of those people had lived in the United States.

That's a lot of grieving people.

That's not all we grieve.

The quarantines and closures have put millions out of work. Nearly a quarter of this state's population has applied for unemployment benefits. In the nation, ten million have filed, more people than lost their jobs to the Great Recession twelve years ago.

As well as the loss of income and family security, that's a loss of the sense of well-being, of purpose, of a place in the world.

This morning, for the fifth week in a row, we cannot gather for worship. On this celebration day, we miss our friends. On this festal day, we stay in our homes. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel good.

That's a lot of grief.

Grief is where we begin.

Debie Thomas writes at JourneywithJesus.net, "Early in the morning, while it was still dark... That's where Easter really begins. It begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. The creeds and clarifications we cherish nowadays came later. What came first were many variations on the same theme...: hope in the midst of struggle. As in: here's what happens when ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God. Here's what it looks like when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn."

If human eyes witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, that moment he emerged from the tomb, no pen ever recorded it or no copyist ever repeated it on another sheet of parchment. Even in Matthew's gospel, which tells of an angel rolling the stone aside before two astonished women, Jesus does not emerge from the tomb. He meets them unexpectedly further down the road, as if he'd already left the tomb before they arrived.

As Amy Lunde-Whitler writes, "And, impossibly, we do arrive at Sunday morning only to realize that resurrection happened in the darkness, when we're weren't there to see it and at first glance, we didn't recognize it."

Just like Mary. Just like Peter and the beloved disciple. Each of them saw that empty tomb, each of them in their own way failed to understand. They didn't rejoice. The two men returned home. Mary remained weeping by the tomb. Where else could she go?

As Laura Everett writes in a reflection for Religion News Service, "There is no silver lining with so much death. What there is, is a massive disruption.

"After disruptions, there can be honesty. My comfort, ill-fitting as it is, is in an honest Easter that stares straight into the eyes of death and empire, and still declares love stronger than the grave.

"My comfort is the risen Christ outside the tomb, saying to Mary Magdalene 'Do not hold on to me' and knowing she felt this disruption, too."

There it is. We are living disrupted lives, overturned lives, grieving lives, fearful lives. We have abundant reason. We are also the children of the Easter people. We are the heirs of Mary Magdalene who heard her name spoken by the risen Jesus and held onto him so tightly that he had to tell her to let go. We are the successors of Mary Magdalene, the first apostle, who was told to go and bring the message of Jesus' resurrection to the men who did not understand. We are the recipients of her testimony, of their testimony, of centuries of repeating that same great word: "I have seen the Lord."

To be honest, that's not where I am this Easter morning. I feel more like Mary a few moments before, deep in grief and rattled by strange things going on that I do not understand. I cannot tell whether the signs are good or bad. I cannot tell whether the signs are signs or coincidence. I cannot tell what might be truly meaningful.

I'm ready to ask the first figure that comes along to tell me the one thing I want to know, not because it will make everything make sense, but because I have to do what I have to do in my grief.

The truth for Mary and the truth for me is that the resurrection has already happened. She didn't know; I know, but my heart still fears. But it doesn't matter. Jesus lives whether we know it or not.

Jesus rose without a human eye upon him, remember. Jesus lived whether anybody knew it or not. Jesus lives whether we're feeling it or not. Jesus lives because Jesus lives.

Where are you this Easter morning? Are you Mary in those first hours, making your way to the tomb because what else can you do? Are you the puzzled Mary, racing to find friends who can help you cope with the frightening and unexpected? Are you Peter or the other disciple, putting heart, body, and soul into a desperate search for something that makes sense? Are you Mary left alone again, still weeping because your friends have not been able to help? Are you Mary, waiting to hear a familiar voice say your name? Are you Mary, holding onto a miracle and determined never to let it go? Are you Mary, running away from the graves once more, this time with tears of joy streaming and a message to tell that can heal every broken heart?

You might be in any of those places. You may go through any number of them today or any day.

You've got to do what you've got to do.

As for me, I am waiting for that voice to say my name. I am waiting for the disruption of resurrection to disrupt the forces of death.

We all have to do what we have to do. It might be grieving. It might be racing. It might be exploring. It might be weeping. It might be asking what and where and why and why and why. It might be embracing. It might be telling the story of joy.

We all have to do what we have to do.

"Take a deep breath, writes Amy Lunde-Whitler. "Resurrection is happening in the darkness of night, in the middle of grief, completely unseen. Resurrection is happening.

"When it finally calls us by name, that is when the grief turns to joy. That is when we tell the friends and strangers."

Do what you need to do this Easter, but do what you need to do having heard this word: Jesus rose from the dead without our sight, without our hearing, without our presence. That has already happened, and amidst the disruption of our lives that has not changed. Do what you have to do, but remember: all the stages in this story lead, in the end, to a deep embrace and a story of joy to share.

Cling to that, and believe: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Amen.