



The Great Vigil of Easter (A)

He Has Been Raised from the Dead

[RCL]: Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10

Imagine this, a conversation between two women named Mary, long ago and far away:

“Let’s go home, Mary. There’s nothing more to be done, really. It’s pointless.”

“No, Mary, it’s important that we anoint his body, if we can. That’s what we do.”

“But it’s cold, and I’m tired. Yesterday was a terrible day, and it’s dark and scary out here.”

“Let’s go on. We need to perform our rituals. That’s who we are. It will help our grieving, and it will show our respect for the one we loved so much.”

“I can’t believe he’s dead. I know we were there. We saw it—so horrible. But it’s almost as if it never happened.”

“Oh, it happened, alright. But we need to go on.”

“Well, alright—but this is not something I’m much looking forward to.”

The Resurrection: in this brief imaginative reconstruction of a dialogue, it wasn’t a very big event. No candlelight vigil, no singing, no dramatic lighting effects, no fragrant flowers, not even any incense! Just two women, the pre-dawn chill of the desert, and the darkness of a cave.

What must it have been like for those two women, both named Mary?

The one from the town of Magdala, who we call Mary Magdalene, we know was one of Jesus’ closest and most trusted companions.

In the apocryphal gospel that bears her name, Jesus appears to the disciples at the Resurrection and charges them to “preach the good news.” But, the story goes on, “they were distressed and wept greatly. [They asked,] ‘If they didn’t spare him, how will they spare us?’”

“Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.’ When Mary had said these things, she turned their heart toward the Good, and they began to debate about the words of the Savior.”

It’s no wonder this gospel was suppressed; thousands of years of misogyny simply would not permit such a story, that a *woman* should be responsible for founding the church!

Get this clearly: the men were crying, and the *women* were strong. The men were afraid, and the *women* were resolute. And that upside-down notion of Late Antiquity’s view of humanity is precisely what we read in the canonical gospels, as well—the ones attributed to male authors.

The men had, so far as we can tell, abandoned Jesus. The women returned to the tomb to anoint his body. And there is no account anywhere that suggests they actually *wanted* to do this. It was their duty, their solemn obligation.

Those of us who have buried a close relative may have an inkling of how they felt: it has to be done, and I have to do it, but I really, really don’t want to—something like that. Mixed emotions, contradictory urges, complex and confusing feelings.

So, it’s no surprise that they left the empty tomb with joy *and* fear. They’d just encountered an angel, whose appearance, we are told, was like lightning. And whose countenance caused Pilate’s burly guards to shake in their boots and freeze up.

Yet these women, in their quiet determination to pay their respects to Jesus—in all their pain and anxiety and terror—these women would actually stop and listen to the angel’s message. And what a message it is: “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you.”

This announcement—like the resurrection appearances of Jesus—is defiant but quiet, mystical but also somehow clear, confusing but ultimately revelatory.

And *this* earthquake took place while everyone was sleeping, unlike Good Friday’s noonday tremor. This proclamation happens to two faithful women and a few wimpy soldiers—not to the hundreds, maybe thousands, who witnessed Jesus’ death. And this joy comes in the midst of profound grief—a surprise that certainly would be difficult to adjust to.

When you think about it, it's really quite amazing that we are here, nearly two thousand years later. A faith founded by a God who is executed as a criminal and who rises from the dead, not in the glorious majesty we would have wished, but in quiet and confusing encounters—starting, by all accounts, with a couple of women.

Christianity: a great movement, a gigantic and enduring institution, an amazing phenomenon—and all from this humble beginning.

How this could have happened has always been something of a mystery. That is, until one Lent, hearing of two travelers who had the privilege of spending a few days' vacation on the Caribbean island of St. Croix. Outside their bungalow was a large bush, mostly twigs and almost bare of leaves. Although this island had not suffered greatly from the previous fall's hurricane season, there was lingering evidence of powerful storms.

So, this bush: there for the contemplation every morning as they sat and sipped their coffee. Just a few twigs, really—and at the end of about half of them, some very defiant blossoms. Nice, eh? It was as if the bush was trying to say, in its own quiet way, "I'm not dead."

Nevertheless, impatient city people that they were, they considered the bush an eyesore, and they thought about just ripping it out by its roots and throwing it in the dustbin, as a service to the landlord and the greater community.

But, about the third day—it takes three days to decompress from urban life, right? On that third day, they noticed on a bare, stark branch a hummingbird perched on a twig, apparently asleep.

Have you ever seen a hummingbird relax? It's a rare thing indeed. And this little bird chose this apparently dead bush for its rest and safety. And, as they looked closer, they noticed *hundreds* of tiny lizards crawling all over that bush, jumping from limb to limb.

What at first appeared at a glance to be dead, or at least disfigured, turned out to be a sign of hope and abundant life. The discovery was more profound because, at first glance, it appeared otherwise. More convincing, perhaps, because they had realized it themselves—and almost by accident. More believable, because the difference between the bush being dead and teeming with life was not about confronting a huge display of blossoms and foliage, but about noticing the tiny, almost imperceptible signs.

This is the resurrection of Jesus. No thunder or displays of divine pyrotechnics. No booming voice from heaven. No majesty, no pomp. Just an ordinary guy, blending in with the crowd, cooking fish on the beach, breaking bread at the dinner table, comforting his friends.

As Mary Magdalene has told us, “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us true Human beings.”

So, today we pause from the frenzy of our lives for this great vigil. We have made ourselves still so that we can notice for ourselves: Jesus has been raised from the dead. *Amen.*

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