

“His Suggestive Absence”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

A brief reflection for Easter Sunday

John 20.1-10

March 27, 2016

On the first day of the week, early, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter, and then to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said,

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in, and saw the grave wrappings lying there. But he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the grave wrappings lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was not with the grave wrappings, but folded in a place by itself.

Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Pico Iyer writes books about travel, and he wrote this: *“death is the one great adventure of which there are no surviving accounts; death, by definition, is what happens to someone else. [Experience and scientific observation] falter before death. Yet [death] is more certain than love and more reliable than health.”*¹

There is wisdom in that. However, with respect, I don’t think when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb that morning, she was thinking of death as a great adventure, but as a tragic and unjust insult. She went expecting nothing other than cold silence, Jesus’ corpse now alienated from life. And Jesus, that which made him who he so wonderfully was, now absent, exiled, stolen, lost forever. Death.

And when Peter and the other one — for some reason he is just called the Beloved Disciple — when they scrambled to the site, responding to Mary’s alarm, they were fearing they’d find desecration! Evidence of a break-in. A scornful final sentence to Jesus’ tragic tale.

¹ “Death, Be Not a Stranger,” Time Magazine, August 8, 1994. Quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1138.

But what they found did not fit what they expected. Not evidence of robbery, but against it. As our “gardener friend”² said a few minutes ago, stealing from a crucified man would be bad business. Wasting time to unwrap the body, a foolish risk. Tidying up afterwards? No, something else was going on.

Mary was expecting Death. Peter and the Beloved were expecting robbery. But they found neither. For Death itself had been robbed of its prey.

The Beloved Disciple was the second to go inside, and the first to believe. What he saw was nothing, no Jesus. What he started believing changed everything.

Resurrection.

II

Resurrection is God’s insistence that life matters.

Death, along with Sin and Evil — all joined in a diabolical trinity that has had its way in this world for far too long. Cheeky and sneering, arrogant and greedy, they stalk us, grab us, twist us and destroy us. Tyrants among us think they can use Death to terrorize. But even they end up in its grave. We suppose we can master Sin — a bit here, a bit there, for when it suits our purposes and pleasures. But we soon find that Sin masters us and we can’t shake it off. Evil carves a line into each of our souls, and renders us its unwilling, and sometimes willing accomplices.

Resurrection is God the true Trinity having the last word. With Resurrection, God shuts up Evil, and silences Sin, and breaks Death. Yes, they will continue to have their play, and we, among all their victims, cry out “How long, O Lord?” And Death will continue to stake its cold claim on all of us. But Resurrection proclaims God’s final, No! The living and the dead, we are all in God’s hands. With resurrection, God decisively and finally bends the curve of the cosmos to life. God’s will, will be done on earth. God’s justice will flow like a rushing river. God’s peace will spread like a mighty wind.

Of course Jesus was absent from the tomb. He had pirouetted upon the grave, laughed at Death in the face.³ For to God, life matters.

III

Resurrection is also God’s insistence that this creation matters.

God “has created and is creating” it.⁴ God is “the Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is,

² At the start of the service, we saw a monologue performed which imagined what a fictitious gardiner might have experienced that morning. It was called “Rushin’ To-and-Fro.”

³ This image catches the cheekyness of Jesus’ victory. It’s a cartoon by Cuyler Black.
<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CB0fTNgUkAAEWJm.jpg>

⁴ From the United Church of Canada’s *A New Creed*.

seen and unseen.”⁵ And God says it is all very good.⁶ Including us, creatures of stardust and holy breath. God chooses to craft each one of us. The divine Artisan knits us together, soul and body. Death unravels us. But with resurrection, God gathers the strands back together.

Many philosophies and spiritualities — including some Christian ones — dare to divide soul from body, what God has joined together. They’ve poo-pood this material world as low, base, finally worthless. They (we!) have decided that if creation does not finally matter, if this is a world “we’re just a-passin’ through,” then we can do whatever we want with it. Many dismiss our bodies as temporary shells, or even putrefying prisons, from which our souls will one day thankfully escape. I know these bodies can be a pain, from which sometimes we do cry for release. But God’s answer is not to chuck them aside. It’s resurrection. It’s God’s re-crafting, re-storing, re-newing and re-deeming of our bodies and our souls. Of us!

Of course Jesus was absent from the tomb. In him, resurrection has begun! And with in Jesus our resurrections will happen. Because to God, creation matters.

IV

One more. Resurrection is God’s vindication of Jesus.

Those three friends that morning were broken and grieving for a man who had been crucified. That was not just an exceptionally cruel way to execute someone. It was meant to destroy them. To destroy any sense that they were one of us, crucifixion dehumanized. To destroy any hope that they were heroic, crucifixion was a message of absolute defeat. To destroy any honour or dignity, crucifixion advertised their humiliation, their degradation. Up there, cut off, alone, forsaken, God-forsaken. That’s why they used it, perfected it as a public performance of their power. That’s why they did it to Jesus, to destroy him and everything about him.

But God raised Jesus. God undid everything they thought crucifixion did. In this One they dehumanized — and think of all who are dehumanized in our world — we find the fullness of humanity. In this One defeated and condemned — and think of all who have been beaten, who cry out for justice against false verdicts — we see God’s victory. This One degraded — think of all who are kept low — he is God’s glory. This One deserted — think of all who are alone — he is God’s presence.

This One, this Jesus, crucified and risen, says to you and to me, “Come. Come my way. Let me give you life.”

You can be a Beloved Disciple . . . looking and believing.

⁵ From the *Nicene Creed*.

⁶ Genesis 1:31.