

“Showing Up Early”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Reflection Offered at Elora United Church on the 4th Sunday of Easter

Exodus 16 (selections); Luke 23:49-56

May 7, 2017

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Sin wilderness, which is located between Elim and Sinai. They set out on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt.

The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole assembly to death.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. . . .

In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the wilderness surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.’”

The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat.

Moses said to them, “Don’t keep any of it until morning.” But they didn’t listen to Moses. Some kept part of it until morning, but it became infested with worms and stank. Moses got angry with them. Every morning they gathered it, as much as each person could eat. But when the sun grew hot, it melted away. . . .

The Israelite people called it manna. It was like coriander seed, white, and tasted like honey wafers.

Exodus 16.1-4, 13-21, 31
Common English Bible (alt)

Fear crashed through her body, and jerked her awake.

The darkness hid the hides of the tent from sight. Still, she could see it. Its lines, colours and textures, she had memorized them. It wasn't much, at all. But it was *their* tent. *Theirs!* She'd never owned anything before. Not even herself.

Her ears prowled the darkness, stalking every sound: the goats shuffling to stay warm, a man coughing, a baby crying, a mother gently shushing, her own Elishma, snoring. And the sea.

They had been walking beside it for days. On one side, the sea washing. On the other, the mountains climbing, mysterious. Behind, Egypt. Ahead . . . who knew?

She was a slave-child of slave-children of slave-children . . . you get the idea. At least there had been some stability in that. Why would she ever have thought ahead? It would have been like imagining food when your bag is empty; it only makes you hurt more.

She was imagining food. And hurting.

Who did she belong to now? Elishma? Yes. He cared for her. She loved him. Before her husband, was she her father's? Not really. A slave, even a father, never really had any claim on his children. How would Elishma be? Suddenly-free, how would he learn to be a husband to her? Would he become cruel as masters are? She didn't think so. She hoped not.

She shifted to sitting, and looked at her babies. They slept as always: soft, silent, vulnerable. Everything had changed for them, and they knew nothing. Maybe it was it good they were too young? Would they remember the infestation of frogs? The day boils suddenly covered their masters' bodies? The grief-screams of Egyptian parents that night? Did they now think walking between walls of water is normal? She was protecting them from her own terror. Was it working?

Should she tell them stories she'd heard as a child? Of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekkah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel. They had seemed like gods to her young mind. Gods had been everywhere she looked. She couldn't miss seeing her masters' gods: *Horus, Hathor, Ra, Nepit*, and many, many more. Unlike those old stories, Egyptian myths were tangible, touchable, carved in stone, painted on walls. She knew them. And she'd always known they were not for her, a Hebrew slave. She might have resented it, if she'd given it thought. But thinking like that never served any purpose. It was as it was. Forever and ever.

Now, though, she was out here, and there were no gods to see.

No glimpses of this *Eh-yay*.¹ *Eh-yay* . . . that's what Moses, the Egyptian prince with the Hebrew name, said their god's name is. This was the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. She'd never heard of this god. Certainly never imagined a god who could be hers. But *Eh-yay* had sent those curses on the masters. *Eh-yay* had made the seabed dry for them to pass through. *Eh-yay* had destroyed pharaoh's chariots. *Eh-yay* saved her babies. And *Eh-yay* was feeding them now, in the wilderness.

But she had never seen *Eh-yay*. She was so afraid.

II

Once outside the tent, she breathed deeply. She could smell the sea. Then, she moved onto the plain. The moon lit her way. Still, every few steps she winced when her toe stubbed. The small rocks were everywhere.

But nothing else. Nothing else covered the ground. Nothing.

Living on the gruel of slavery had given her a very tolerant tongue. Especially when hungry. Still, she'd be reluctant to try it at first. It looked strange. No roots, so it hadn't sprung up overnight. Nor had there been enough wind to blow it in. Besides, it was spread evenly, and everywhere. What strange magic?

Its taste was good! And it filled her babies, and her.

Moses said it was *Eh-yay*'s gift to them. Someone called it *manna*, and that word stuck.

At first, they had scooped up as much as they could. But they quickly learned that no matter how much or little you got, it was always just enough, and always enough. Any they saved for the next day turned sickingly rotten overnight. Even the bit she'd hidden away. (Who was this *Eh-yay* who could see even that?) So they couldn't save any.

This was the fear that had lurched her awake. She was getting hungry. Would there be *manna* in the morning? Enough? There had been yesterday? But what about today?

She probed the ground, step after step. Then, she dropped, feeling furiously for any sign of it. Any hint. She bent low, and smelled the dry dust.

Nothing. No sign. Nothing.

She wept and worried.

Slowly, the sun began to rise. And the ground started turning white. But, through her tears, could she see?

¹ Hebrew for "I Am." See Exodus 3:14.

And everyone who knew Jesus, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance observing these things.

Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. He was a good and righteous man. He hadn't agreed with the plan and actions of the council. He was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and eagerly anticipated God's kingdom. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Taking it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried.

It was the Preparation Day for the Sabbath, and the Sabbath was quickly approaching. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph. They saw the tomb and how Jesus' body was laid in it, then they went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils. They rested on the Sabbath, in keeping with the commandment.

Luke 23:49-56
Common English Bible

III

He had trouble finding the place. Hadn't asked how to get there. Hadn't wanted to remind others, or himself, that he'd spent most of yesterday, and all of last night, hiding. It was a shame they all shared . . . well, except a few who stayed with Jesus to the end. He couldn't face asking them.

He'd just assumed the legionnaires had thrown what was left of Jesus into the pit where all the crucified rotted away. So when he'd heard Jesus had been taken care of, his body washed and wrapped, and laid in a tomb — a rich one, carved in a rock — he had never imagined that happening. Then he knew he had to go see for himself. He didn't want to. It panicked him, really. But he had to.

He should have waited. It was the Sabbath, and he'd have to walk much further than the rabbis allowed. Maybe the rabbis were right. Had they been right about Jesus too? But he went, nervous, feeling guilty about it. But he had to.

Because of that dream. The one he'd had for weeks, never knowing what it meant. Just a cave, cut in rock. He was being pulled to it. Pulled to look inside. But he never got there. Something stopped him. Then he'd wake up.

The path turned, and up a rise a bit there it was: grave. The cave from his dream!

But it had a rock. A stone, pushed over its mouth. Sealed shut, and silent.

He pushed his hands against it. Then, fell into it, scraping his cheek down the rough

coldness, sobbing. Then, he walked away.

The sun began setting. The Sabbath was ending. And behind him, a rumble. But was he too far gone now to hear?

IV

What do they say about the early bird? She gets the worm, right. But, what if she shows up too early?

God promised the Hebrew's manna, enough for everyone, every morning. But I imagine it was hard to wait through the night.

Jesus promised he'd rise from death. His resurrection would be the beginning, for everyone, of the new creation. It would happen on Sunday. Even if they had believed him, how hard would it have been to wait through Saturday?

It's hard to wait on God's promises. We are hungry. We are desperate. Our imaginations are hardening. Our outlook is dimming.

Faith is waiting. Even then — hungry, desperate, hardening, dimming — faith is waiting. Faith is trusting God while waiting for God.

If we don't wait, if we don't trust might we miss God giving manna in the morning? And God rolling back the stone?

Because, whether we are waiting for it or not, God is preparing a feast for all creation! And there is more than enough! Whether we are waiting or not, God has rolled the stone away. Jesus is alive!