



“A Collision of Contradictory Worlds”
Scripture – John 20:1-18
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Presbyterian pastor, Kate Haynes Murphy, notes that it is a maxim among literary scholars that if you take into account all the novels, all the short stories, all the fairy tales, and all the poems in the world, there are really only seven stories. “Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth.”

However, Murphy declares that there are really “only two stories and infinite variations of them. There’s the story of the Fall and the story of Redemption. (We might say it another way.) There’s the story of the Crucifixion and the story of the Resurrection. (That is,) the story of Good Friday and story of Easter Sunday...There is the story told by the powers and principalities that are passing away, and the story of the eternal Kingdom of God. There are only two stories and we become the one we believe.”¹

“The Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri says, ‘One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way. We are also living the stories we planted in ourselves. We live the stories that either give our lives meaning, or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, we change our lives.’ Easter is the day we finally understand that God has changed our story.”²

Today’s text from the Gospel of John informs us that very early on Sunday, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. If you have lost a loved one, you may have had the experience of waking up well before sunrise and not being able to go back to sleep. You lie there in bed and replay the painful event over and over in your mind until you finally stumble out of bed.

After replaying the nightmare a hundred times, Mary decided to walk to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed on Friday. Was she going there because she still could not believe it was true? Or might it have been her way of showing respect and saying a final goodbye?

Have you ever visited the spot where your loved one was put to rest just to talk to him/her? To say, “I love you. I treasure the life we shared. Thank you for picking me up when I fell, for teaching me how to treat people, for forgiving me when I hurt you, for showing me what is important in life.”

Perhaps that's why Mary went to the tomb – to talk to Jesus. And because her wound was still so blistering raw, she may have marched there to have it out with him. Perhaps she wanted to scream, “Why did you have to push so hard? Why couldn't you have toned down your message or proceeded a little slower? Why did you have to get yourself killed?”

Whatever prompted her to trek to the tomb that morning, nothing was as she had expected. She had seen the men seal the tomb, but now that mammoth stone was pushed aside. She ran as rapidly as her exhausted legs could muster. She ran to Peter and the other disciple and blurted out her interpretation of what she had witnessed. “They have taken our Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Mary's assumption is that the authorities have concocted yet another way to sully the reputation of their fallen leader and poke a finger in the eye of his followers. They have snatched his body.

Peter and the other disciple react by speeding to the tomb. When they arrive, they peer inside and all they can see are the linen wrappings. They are either bewildered or convinced that Mary was right. Our passage says only: “The disciples returned to their homes.”

In the meantime, Mary has trudged back to the tomb. Tears stream down her cheeks as she stares into the open cavern. She is startled to see two messengers of God sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They question Mary: “Why are you weeping?” She repeats her assessment: “Because someone has taken his body.”

Then – you know this feeling – Mary detects someone behind her. She pivots, and through the early morning haze and tear-filled eyes she sees a figure. Imaging him to be the gardener, she asks if he has taken the body. He replies. “Mary.” She is floored. It is her beloved Jesus. He tells her to instruct his disciples that he has risen.

Mary bolts from the garden and locates the disciples. She makes the announcement that changes history: “I have seen the Lord.”

Tom Long notes that “on one of his Prairie home companion shows Garrison Keeler quipped, ‘Never say anything bad about a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes. By then he's a mile away you've got his shoes and you can say whatever you want!’ The humor springs up, because what starts out as a piece of inspirational advice about developing empathy, turns out to be a crass word of self-centered cynicism. The contradictory worlds simply do not belong on the same page, and they collide; the world of moral vision crashes into the flat earth logic of the utterly utilitarian and amoral, and the shock of laughter erupts.”

“Easter, in a much more profound way, involves a collision of contradictory worlds: the world of inevitable death and cemeteries and women who make their sad pilgrimage to the tomb, a world of fixed limits and low horizons thrown into sudden juxtaposition with the world of the now risen, Jesus, full of life and joyful greetings and assurances not to be afraid.”³

The resurrection of Jesus is the unexpected jolt that contradicts all expectations. We think we have it all figured out. We know the way things work. Nothing lasts forever. Everything perishes. When you're

dead, you're dead. End of story. But, the resurrection of Jesus is a divine act of defiance to the power of death.

Brian Blount, former President of Union Seminary in Richmond, and a Westminster Distinguished Speaker, writes: "The statistics say, 'Death wins. Every single time. The Resurrection says, 'Hold on. Not so fast...'⁴

When Jesus was put to death, it appeared that the Jesus movement had been stopped cold. Not interrupted, not detoured onto another path, but terminated along with its leader. And not only did the Romans and Temple authorities believe that silencing Jesus would silence his followers, but his followers believed it, too. On Friday afternoon when Jesus was killed, his disciples fled and went into hiding afraid that the authorities would come after them next.

Yet within a short time of abandoning Jesus – and in Peter's case, even denying that he knew Jesus – something life-altering transformed them. Something filled them with such courage that nothing – absolutely nothing – could deter them from proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Most of the original 12 would eventually be persecuted and martyred for their stubborn faith in the Resurrection. What could have so radically transformed them, if not appearances of Jesus after he died?

A colleague tells of a recent interview of "Ukrainian Pastor Ivan Rusyn who talked about the constant terror and uncertainty of life in his country. But he also said the conflict has helped his church to hammer out its vocation. The church has worked to meet people in their need, providing everything from food and fuel to a space for lament. His people have developed a remarkable generosity and a new grit that is astounding. In his own life, Rusyn has agonized over prayers, unanswered, over his anger at the violence and suffering."

"But then he said something surprising, he said, 'I will follow (Jesus) even if I don't understand. Will I survive? Will my family survive? I will follow anyway. Somehow, during this year, my relationship with God has become more real.'"

"Something has gripped Rusyn and his church. They are being transformed. Amidst their grief and the very real horror of evil, they have hope. *Somehow* – he cannot explain it, but it is true. It is a future hope that is changing their present life."⁵

There are two stories. The story of Crucifixion and the story of Resurrection. The story of Good Friday and the story of Easter. The story of despair and the story of hope. And you become the story you believe.

NOTES

1. Kate Hanes Murphy, "Two Stories," *Journal for Preachers, Easter 2024*, p.14.
2. Ibid.
3. Tom Long, "The Shock of Easter," *Journal for Preachers, Easter 2024*, p.4-5.
4. Brian Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2014), p. 41.
5. Rebecca Gurney, "Somehow," *Journal for Preachers Easter 2024*, p. 31.

Resurrection Prayer 2024 ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious and loving God, we are deeply grateful that you have given us the chance to have lives of joy thanks to Christ's rising from the dead. In his victory over death, you revealed yourself as a God of transformation who is ceaselessly working to bring good out of evil, justice out of oppression, peace out of strife and hope out of despair. Through all the stunning peaks and lonely valleys of our lives, we pray that our faith in the resurrection may live within us as a mighty source of strength and guidance and confidence.

Comforting God, we pause to pray for those for whom the proclamation of victory over death sounds faint or unbelievable. We pray for the innocents in our country and across the globe whose lives have been torn apart by violence, loss, prejudice, or poverty. We pray for the lost, the lonely, and those who struggle with illness of body, mind or spirit. May all who suffer and all who grieve find in You courage in their nightmare of darkness; and may Christ's resurrection be a steadfast source of comfort that heightens their hope in your promise of new life.

Loving God, we pray for those within our church family who are ill, for those facing a severe test, and for those who have lost a loved one. We pray for your healing Spirit that all who are in need of a friend or a good medical report or something positive to look forward to may find health, wholeness, and a firm resolve. May they be touched by the Easter hope of new life.

Eternal God, when the constant drumbeat of death, injustice, and despair threaten to make us cynical or depressed, we pray that you will replenish our spirits with courage to resist evil and to trust in your resurrection power. We pray that you deepen our commitment to faithfully follow the example of Jesus so that your light and love may shine through us.

Generous God, may we seek out joy in our time with family and friends; may we find delight in the laughter and energy of children, and may we open our eyes to the beauty of Spring and see it as another example of Your transforming love.

This and all things, we pray in the name of the Prince of Peace who taught us to pray together as a church family, saying, **“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**