

“Hidden in Plain Sight”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Easter Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; April 16, 2017

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

For all the plentiful symbols, sights and sounds of this twenty-first century Easter, none of what we see today was present on that first Easter morning. There were no brass or stringed instruments to undergird resurrection songs. No perfect clusters of lilies, or bold “alleluias”, or choir anthems, or squeaky-clean children. No Hallmark cards, ham dinners, egg hunts, chocolate bunnies, or marshmallow Peeps. There was nothing that set this day off as special from any other “first day of the week, at early dawn”.

Even the biblical awe and splendor found in other Christian holidays is missing from the first Easter morning. There are no supernatural tongues “as of fire” like we see at Pentecost, or heavenly host singing “Glory to God in the highest” like we have at Christmastime. If I were a TV producer and this was the script brought to me for Easter Sunday, I’d have it rewritten for sure. “Make it more cosmic, more divine, more visually inspiring, or this will never find a market.” There’s not even a resurrected Christ visible in this story, a story that talks all *around* but never *to* this One who is supposed to have arisen. Sure, there are dazzling messengers, hearsay reports, and some linen clothes, but we don’t see the resurrected body anywhere. We’ve been talking throughout Lent about “more than meets the eye”, but there’s *nothing* here, nobody—“no body”—that meets the eye! All we have is a stone rolled away, an empty tomb, and questionable witnesses.

Most troublesome is the fact that while evidence for resurrection is so hard to find, evidence of crucifixion is all too visible. Great crowds were there at his unjust arrest, his sham trials, and his public execution—plenty of folks clearly saw those things. But then, such sights meet our expectations, because we’re used to that. There’s plenty of evidence for such injustices, still visible everywhere in the world. Our beloveds die in their youth, mental or physical illness strikes in bewildering or life-denying ways, tyrants rule unchecked and butcher those they rule over, human communities fray without the holding power they once had, and even the saintliest of people suffer the broken-down-ness of older age. In [the poet Yeats’ language](#), “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

There’s not always a cross in these scenes, but they are crucifixions by other names. When might does not make right, virtue suffers without redemption, and death awaits with jaws open for all. Without proof of resurrection, we’re left with a foreboding sense that nothing we do can long delay what is the guaranteed end (we fear). This is the spiritual state of any who look on the world, heartsick, seeing death as the inevitable victor, and hope or God as a feel-good mirage. This may have been on the minds of those

first tomb-visitors, of “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them”.

No, there was no magic show or cinematic wizardry to rouse them from their thoughts. What they got instead was a question from two men in dazzling clothes: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” This is the first indication that perhaps things were not the way they appeared to be. These women were doing what human nature does—fixating understandably on what is dead in the world, dead in our lives, grief-stricken and broken with loss. But the question suggests that the Beloved One who had died might no longer be dead! “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Could it be that death is *not* the ultimate end, but the *penultimate* one? Is there something else at the end instead—maybe even *life*? The messenger’s question to the women dismantles everything they thought they knew about how the world works. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

One thing I’ve learned about grief is that it’s magnified through [what Andrew Lester calls the loss of a “future story”](#). We go through life with some sense of what the future will hold: a child will graduate and one day get married, hard work at a job will lead to promotions, or that love—once found—will last for a lifetime. These future stories guide our thoughts and actions in the present. They help us make it through the terrible twos and teenage years without *killing* our children, seek opportunities for success at work, and remain together through the ups and downs of marriage. But every so often these “future stories”—however necessary and helpful—crash against the rocky shores of reality, and they break. They cannot hold any longer. The future breaks. When a child comes out as lesbian or transgender, the future stories we’ve been imagining about their wedding day must change. When the bank files papers to foreclose on the house, our imagined future of happy family gatherings there will no longer come true. Or when the supposed “savior of the world” dies on a cross, all the hoped-for scenes of his victory—over Caesar, over poverty, over violence in the world—are lost as well. The loss of “future stories” leads to disorientation and grief, in part because we don’t know where to turn next. We ask ourselves, “now what”, and begin the hard journey of envisioning a *new* future story that considers the facts of the present moment.

The dawning of a new future story is what we see here in the women and the disciple Peter. The crucifixion and then the empty tomb shatter their expectations of life and death with the Savior. Could it be that he is among the living and not the dead? The dazzling messengers who speak to the women help them start envisioning life with a risen Savior rather than a dead Messiah. “Remember?” they say. “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” “Then they remembered his words”, we read. Then they start to live differently in light of them. Then they have a new future story to lean into. The future story changes because an empty tomb calls them to remember the words and actions of Christ: that healing comes to the blind and despairing, that the poor will be blessed, that those who grieve will be comforted, that love of God, neighbor and self has transformative power beyond any human imagining. Easter’s resurrection is about having eyes to see anew, to glimpse the life that once appeared impossible. Even when crucifixion hangs over the world, a daunting and ominous threat that everything will fall apart, Easter points to God at work right there in the face of death itself. Because Christ is alive, suffering and grief are not inevitable, nor is death the ultimate reality.

For those with eyes to see, a deeper truth becomes visible with the empty tomb. It may not always show up in flashy, headline-grabbing ways, but even when it looks like all is lost, God is present there too, weaving a new thing from the loose threads of grief, anger and sorrow. Our Easter plea is to let the Good Friday realities of the world be remade in a new future story, eclipsed by this greater hope of resurrection, hidden in plain sight. As [Mary Oliver has written](#), “I don’t ask for the sights in front of me to change, only the depth of my seeing.”

If Christ is risen, so what? What does that mean in your life and in ours? If death is no longer the final word, what else is possible for God? We no longer need to look for the living among the dead, but can

recognize the living God at work with hidden transformations here and now. We can see the birdsong and green shoots of spring for what they are, sermons of God's living presence in even the harshest winter. We can boldly envision the transformation of broken lives, and work to make it so. We can hold the audacious hope of a church renewed, and see it become more real every week. We can trust that the world is not bereft but beloved by God, who still holds this feverish world with loving arms and healing hands. Crucifixion may have more visible evidence, but resurrection has the deepest, most lasting power.

This is the faith, the "future story", that God holds out to us today. It's not easy to believe—if it were more people would be able to see it. Doubts and confusion are welcome here too; they're part of what it means to be human, to be struggling to see yet not quite able to see "more than meets the eye". But here we let the possibilities of transformation and the "wholly new" sit alongside the doubt, and maybe, today, let them have the upper hand. That's what this day is about—opening with hope and trust that something new, something deeper, someone Beyond here, is at work amid all the ragged, terrible sorrows. Life—and not death—is the ultimate last word.

In that spirit, receive a blessing in [the poetry of Sierra DeMulder](#):

*Dear you,
Whoever you are,
However you got here,
This is exactly where you are supposed to be.*

*This moment has waited its whole life for you, [...]
You don't need to suffer anymore.*

*Dear you,
This moment is a surprise party,
You are both hiding in the dark,
And walking through the door,
This moment is a Hallelujah,
This moment is your permission slip,
To finally open that love letter,
You've been hiding from yourself,
The one you wrote when you were little,
When you still danced like a sparkler at dusk [...]*

*Dear you,
And I have always meant, you.
Nothing would be the same if you did not exist. [...]*

*You, the teacher,
The starters gun,
The lantern in the night who offers not a way home,
But the courage to travel farther into the dark. [...]*

*You, the friend,
The sacred chorus of 'How can I help you?'
Who have felt more numb than holy,
More cracked than mosaic,*

*Who has known the tiles of a bathroom by heart,
Who has forgotten what makes you worth it.*

*You, the forgiven,
The forgiver,
Who belongs right here, in this moment.*

*You, this clump of cells,
This happy explosion that happened to start breathing,
And by the grace of whatever is up there,
You got here,
You made it, this whole way,
Through the nights that swallowed you whole,
The mornings that arrived in pieces,
The scabs, the gravel,
The doubt, the hurt,*

*The hurt, the hurt,
Is over today,
You made it,
You made it,
You made it,
Here.*

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed—alleluia!