

Encountering the Resurrection

*Coming to the woods' edge
On my Sunday morning walk,
I stand resting a moment beside a ragged half dead wild plum
In bloom, it's perfume
A moment enclosing me,
And standing side by side
With an old broken blooming tree,
I almost understand,
I almost recognize as a friend
The great impertinence of beauty
That comes even to the dying,
Even to the fallen, without reason
Sweetening the air*

A Sabbath poem by Wendell Berry that I read a few weeks ago.

It's not scriptural, but in my mind I imagined this half-dead wild plum as the fig tree that Jesus cursed for not bearing fruit, weeks before his death.

That perhaps, just as Peter experienced a resurrection of sorts from the shame of denying Jesus three times to being tasked with caring for Jesus' sheep,

That maybe a farmer, on the day of the resurrection came across that shriveled fig tree, mysteriously putting forth new growth, and thought: "By George, it still lives."

I want to explore the profound ways the resurrection is experienced and encountered.

It is perhaps the most powerful narrative humanity has ever known,
As though the Creator embedded it within us, for our ears to perk and our
hearts and minds to be drawn back to it time and time again.
Even those who do not claim to find meaning or validity in the Gospels are
unwittingly drawn to it in all its carbon copies that are the backbone of the
most powerful works of fiction, or poetry, or music.

Where are you encountering the resurrection?

But first, back to the story.

The text today is almost two stories in one.

The first ten verses are really the encounter story of the male disciples.
While it isn't quite intended to be humorous, it is told in a way that brings a
smile to your face.

Those guys.

A step behind all the way through the Gospels, and here we are again.

Needing to get the news secondhand from Mary Magdalene.

Chaotic confusion.

A documented foot race.

A confounding mystery.

If you've been reading John's Gospel like a novel, their approach to the tomb
takes you back to the story of the resurrection of Lazarus nine chapters
earlier.

Another tomb, but this time the stone rolled away.

More strips of linen, but this time not clinging to the body of the recently
deceased, but lying neatly next to the burial cloth.

They had seen this before. But this time it was different.

That beautiful line of scripture as Simon Peter peers into the tomb, taking in
the scene:

“He saw and believed” and “They still did not understand.”

The empty tomb found by the disciples is a place pregnant with potential meaning not yet understood.

But the heart of this story is really in Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrection.

She arrives at the tomb early in the morning

The cold stillness of dawn not yet softened by daylight.

The enveloping darkness a fitting companion to the brokenness of her heart.

Did she even sleep at all? Probably not. At some point you just give up on sleep and hope that the monotony of the day will keep your sorrows at bay.

But things are not as they should be. The stone is not over the entrance.

She runs all the way back to tell the disciples, lungs burning.

Not with exhilaration but with the fear that Jesus' lifeless body, the only thing she has left of him, has also been taken from her.

The disciples come running, they are astounded as well, but they have no answers either, and the text tells us that when no answers are found, they head back to where they were staying.

Leaving Mary standing outside the tomb, crying.

As she weeps she too peers into the tomb, and sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been.

They ask her: "Woman, why are you crying?"

She responds, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."

John Stendahl captures it beautifully:

"After responding to the angels and telling her grief, Mary turns *away* from the tomb; even with the angels, with religious symbolism, with supernatural

promise and implications, it cannot hold her interest. It does not compensate for the reality of Jesus, does not dissolve her grief. He is not there, and she turns away.”

It is only when she turns away from the tomb, turning away from the scene of the inevitability of death and hopelessness, that she encounters the risen Jesus.

Echoing the angels, Jesus asks her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

At first she does not recognize him--we may think of all the different reasons we also don't recognize our Christ--but he calls her by name.

And something clicks.

We are reminded of Jesus' words in chapter 10:

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”

Then she sees and exclaims her greeting in return, “Rabbouni, my teacher.

Mary, flooded with emotion, wants nothing more than to hold on to him and never let him go again.

And yet Jesus tells her not to, instructing her instead to take the news to the rest of the disciples. Which she does.

Our text concludes: “Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.”

Stendhal concludes:

“This is why Mary cannot hold on to Jesus. Her story and his, his experience and hers, cannot be anchored in the past. Nor is it singular. Instead he calls

her by name to announce to the disciples-and by extension to all who would believe--a new creation, an unimaginable future. The good news that she reports to the disciples is only the beginning of an ongoing revelation of what resurrection and its implications might mean.”

Where are you encountering the resurrection?

Where are you encountering the risen Christ?

In our youth Sunday School we are reading through the book of Exodus and we recently read the story of Moses and the burning bush.

I asked them, of all the ways to appear to Moses, why a burning bush.

Leonard and Katrina's son, Uriah responded

“We are all created different and I think God appears to each of us in the way that is most meaningful.”

Incredibly profound for a middle schooler.

I've been thinking about that in the context of where we draw meaning and hope from the resurrection.

Maybe it is in the supernatural act itself, of Jesus defying death, revisited and retold every year, to be wondered at and comforted by every year at this time.

Maybe it is in the faithfulness of Spring and the continual surprises it holds, wild plums presumed dead, coming to life.

Maybe it is in the midst of the horror of war, it is the scene of thousands of Germans waiting outside a train station for Ukrainian refugees, waiting to take complete strangers into their homes.

Maybe it is the energy and life birthed out of our *own* decision to accompany an Afghan refugee family as they create a new life out of the loss of one they can never return to.

Maybe it is in the wonderful new faces in this congregation who have joined us over the last year, bringing new energy and vibrancy when the church has resigned itself to continual decline.

Maybe it is in the promise of a post-pandemic reality, or a new birth in the family, or a reconciled relationship that healed your heart and brought you wholeness you forgot was even possible.

“The encounter with the resurrection can be experienced differently by different people at different times, it's music in different keys and danced in different ways.”

May we embrace the manifestation of the risen Christ where it finds us, allowing it to fill us with defiant hope, and allowing us to witness to the power of life over death and the Creator God who said, let it be so.

Amen