

**“Beyond explanation”, a sermon based on John 20:1-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Easter Day, 21 April 2019.**

It begins in darkness, with Mary of Magdala. At our Good Friday service we heard an imaginary account of what Mary could have thought as she heard Jesus utter the words – “My God my God why have you abandoned me?”. The imaginary account: “I’ve been waiting to hear him speak my name. Mary. Mary of Magdala. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Now I know he will not, will not speak my name. For this God-forsaken cry is specially for me, standing God-forsaken at the foot of his cross. For I am not calm like his mother, or comforted like that thief, or trembling on the brink of faith with that centurion. No. I stand in the utter black-flamed darkness of despair – but closer, closer than them all, to his broken, God-forsaken heart.”

The closeness of Mary and Jesus leads to the sense of being abandoned, abandoned by the one who dies. Then ... when Mary comes to the tomb in the dark of the morning, the abandonment and shock deepens – the stone has been removed. The body has gone. To feel abandoned and to have a body is one thing. A body can be cared for. A body can be treated with dignity. A body calls forth from us rituals of respect. Then to find that even this certainty, this finality, has been messed with, denied, taken.

Easter Day begins in darkness with the absence of a body. The first experience of resurrection is, of all things, a deeper sense of absence and loss, that life is even more dire than we had expected.

Which leads to the response of running. Why? in panic, in bewilderment, in confusion, in desperation? Mary ran to tell Simon and the beloved disciple. Then Simon Peter and the beloved disciple ran. And the beloved disciple outran Peter so he arrived first at the tomb. Now the beloved disciple enters the tomb and believes. It is not clear what that means. Believes what?

Peter and the beloved disciple return to their homes. What else could they do? Perhaps the body was stolen – what could they do about it? Perhaps

the authorities had removed the body further to quell an uprising. What could they do about that in the face of the Empire's power? Let's return to life as best we can, trusting we will get over it, whether we believe or not. Has anything changed here?

Except there is Mary. Mary Magdalene sees Jesus first, runs to the disciples, and returns and stays. While they go home, she stays, at the tomb, bewildered and bereft. Maybe there is something more. As Nadia Bolz Weber puts it, she "remains present to what is real, to what is actually happening." She does so even when what is real feels unbearable.

Resurrection happened in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight brightened the event. No person witnessed it. And even now, no human narrative can contain it. It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down. All we know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death and to set Jesus loose. The presence of two angels suggests no human narrative can contain this moment. It exceeds all our attempts to pin it down.

Which is the rub of resurrection for many people. Resurrection cannot be squeezed into our classic understandings of history or psychology or metaphor without sucking it of its full significance. It seems that the more we try to make resurrection comprehensible, the less transformative it becomes.

What we see in the resurrection stories are people encountering a living Christ, after he was crucified, as a result of which they choose to follow him, in so many different ways, starting with today's story. When Peter sees the empty tomb, he goes home. When the beloved disciple sees it, he believes without comprehension, then goes home. When Mary sees it, she weeps and waits for more.

Our attempts to explain or simplify or reduce resurrection, flatten its meaning. Resurrection is not God tidying up the messiness of death. Resurrection is not God's good news after our bad news. Resurrection is

not God's happy ending to a sad tale. It is certainly not some kind of privatised reward scheme for good behaviour.

Resurrection is an earthquake, with the deep disturbance earthquakes bring – the unnerving, the unsettling, the living in a different reality, with a different god. Resurrection upends settled lives.

Mary, buried in grief, learns the untidiness of resurrection when she is told that she cannot hold on to Jesus. He is set loose in the world. Unable to be held by Caesar or Church or disciples or us, by any human power. Jesus cannot be held back, held down, held in – he is risen.

Brian Wren puts it like this – “Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine, but saving, healing, here and now, and touching every place and time.”

We heard the reading from 1 Corinthians, the Bible's earliest reference to resurrection. In his book *The Faces of Jesus*, Frederick Buechner says: “For Paul the resurrection was no metaphor; it was the power of God. And when he spoke of Jesus as raised from the dead, he meant Jesus alive and at large in the world not as some shimmering ideal of human goodness or the achieving power of hopeful thought but as the very power of life itself. If the life that was in Jesus died on the cross; if the love that was in him came to an end when his heart stopped beating; if the truth that he spoke was no more if no less timeless than the great truths of any time; if all that he had in him to give to the world was a little glimmer of light to make bearable the inexorable approach of endless night—then all was despair.”

To be part of Easter though involves a willingness to linger in the garden, desolate and alone, listening for the sounds of our own name to be spoken in love by a living Christ.

R.S. Thomas describes his experience like this in the poem, “The Answer”:  
There have been times/when, after long on my knees/ in a cold chancel, a  
stone has rolled/from my mind, and I have looked/in and seen the old  
questions lie/ folded and in a place/by themselves, like the  
piled/graveclothes of love's risen body.”

Bonhoeffer said, “Christ did not come into this world so that we might understand him, but that we might cling to him in order to be caught up in the immense event of resurrection.”

Debie Thomas: “You only get anywhere near the truth when all the sensible things to say about God are overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus appears to people in the world.”

The life-changing, world-transforming, joy-evoking, liberating question is this - “How has the risen Christ revealed himself *to you?*”

At the foot of the Cross, Mary did not hear her name. At the door of the empty tomb, she did. That is what Easter involves, as we linger with Mary at the tomb where Christ calls our name and sends us forth. Sends us forth to live with the risen Christ here and now, amid our experiences of struggle and hope, death and new life, darkness and light.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

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