

“Empty Tomb, Full Wonder”
Easter Sunday
April 21, 2019
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Acts 10:34-43
Luke 24:1-12

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but he is risen.”

In the past year or two, I have noticed that my vision-- which has been perfect my whole life-- needs a little help to interpret the messages coming into my brain. Especially at night, and especially in the morning when I first awake: hmm, this is new, I think, as I try to interpret the blurry print before me. I can squint my eyes. I can move whatever I read further from my face to find a new focus. But lately, even these tricks do not work quite well enough. Sometimes, I just really need a pair of reading glasses.

Maybe it was because their eyes had not yet adjusted to the light of dawn. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, James' mother, arrived at the tomb, carrying spices to tend to Jesus' body once the Sabbath had passed, what they saw-- or did not see-- completely perplexed them.

The stone: rolled away. The tomb: empty.

Did they miss something with the sleep still in their eyes? Or worse, did someone steal Jesus' body from its rest?

Two men in dazzling white clothes suddenly show up beside them. These men are like the eyeglasses: they take what the women are able to see right now, and take the learning they have already gathered from all that time spent around Jesus-- those times when he predicted his death and resurrection-- and they help the women to see: “Remember what he told you? Remember, he said he must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. He is not dead, but he is risen.” Finally, the women are able to focus their gaze on the truth that is right in front of them, predicted by Jesus and finally made real. So what did they do once they remembered and could see?

These women preached the first resurrection sermon. They returned to the community of their closest friends, the ones who had best prepared for such a sermon, the disciples who had remained together, praying, and grieving, and wondering what would become of The Way Jesus had shown them.

I can picture the women, shattering the heavy silence as they entered the room where the disciples were hiding out. I imagine their earnestness: foreheads creased in wonder, eyes wide in splendor, voices layering as they finish each other's sentences and build on the drama.

But their small congregation would not believe the women, only hearing their words as idle tales, gossip, fake news. It would be easy to say that these men, the disciples, were deaf to women's voices because they were women's voices and not men's. To some extent, that may be true. I know as a preacher, I have experienced those moments too.

However, another thing might be true as well. Perhaps these men were also, as the angels suggested, looking for the living among the dead. There may have been something about the shadows of death that to the disciples, in that moment, felt worth clinging to.

Parker Palmer sometimes speaks of his struggles with depression. He has noticed that, when he is depressed, "figurative forms of death can be comforting, while resurrection-- the hope of new life-- can feel threatening." Palmer continues, "Death-in-life offers a perverse sense of relief. When I was depressed, nobody expected anything of me, nor did I expect anything of myself. I was exempt from life's challenges and risks. But if I were to find new life, who knows what daunting tasks life might demand I take on? Sometimes we choose death-in-life-- as in an unhealthy relationship, cynicism that shuts us down, non-stop negativity towards others, compulsive over-activity, work that compromises our integrity, substance abuse, etc. -- because we're afraid of what might come our way if we embraced resurrection-in-life."¹

What are *you* afraid of, that makes accepting the tomb more welcoming than risking new life?

As for the 11 disciples, if they looked to their future with Jesus as dead, then not much more would be asked of them. No political risks by association. No preparations for a

¹ This is from a Facebook post on Parker Palmer's profile, April 20, 2019

new world they cannot yet see or understand. No confrontation with the powers that seek to deal violence and oppression. So, I can sympathize with these disciples if they weren't ready to pick up their heavy hearts and hurl them back out into a chaotic and broken world. If we have to see, we would prefer to see dimly rather than take part in the vision of what God is really doing.

Well that makes it even more ironic that it is Peter who breaks rank with the disbelieving disciples, running to the tomb, stooping in, and looking to see for himself. Peter, who just days before denied three times, probably out of fear, that he even *knew* Jesus. Not only did he break rank with the disciples; he also broke rank with his fear. Released from that fear, Peter joined the women in holding up Jesus' vision of *life* for the world.

Yesterday I went to a party hosted by the family of one of my daughter's classmates. They held an Easter egg hunt in their yard for the children, and several of the parents, including us, sat around and visited. I enjoyed getting to know one couple whose son is in my daughter's 1st grade class. They are Christians, and attend a very large Korean church in the area. I asked them how their family and church celebrate Easter morning. It will be a big day at church, they told me. The woman then asked our group, "You know, I have lived in the US for over 20 years now, and I still haven't figured out how Americans get eggs out of bunnies, and what either of those has to do with Easter. "

Yeah, it's pretty weird, I admitted, and not very biblical. It probably comes from European pagan fertility traditions. When evangelists brought Christianity to northern Europe, they looked at what the popular holidays were, and since people were already showing up around the Spring Equinox to celebrate the renewal of the earth, Christians took those symbols and applied them to Easter, and the Christian celebration of new life.

My new Korean acquaintances looked totally confused. So I offered a comparison; In the Korean church, many people have chosen Christianity above any of the other options for religion in Korea or elsewhere. Some have even publicly rejected the beliefs of the generations before them if they weren't Christian. Even so, if you scratch the surface just a little bit, it is likely that you will find ideas or traditions that are very much tied to Confucianism, or Buddhism, or Shamanism, among these Christian friends. Though they have chosen Christianity as the way for them, it is hard to completely remove these other belief systems that have formed their ancestors and have been passed down to them, whether they realize where it comes or not. "I totally get it now!" she said with excitement, as she recalled how her family pays tribute to the ancestors, and her friends consult a fortune teller during important life transitions.

In Korea, as in Europe and in all the places where the gospel caught the people's passions, it allowed us to take the layers of who we are, and to point them towards life abundant that we find in Christ.

In my last church, we had a young Indian woman who started attending. She had many layers to her, and was named for a Hindu goddess, Kali— the destroyer. After attending for a few times, Kali approached me to tell me she wanted to be baptized. The idea in baptism of dying to who she once was felt very freeing to her. Kali shared that she had been in a very abusive household. Not only was there physical violence against her; her father demanded that she be the last to eat, only taking food after the men had finished theirs, because she was the youngest and because she was female. Kali felt humiliated by her father's treatment, and so the idea that Jesus calls everyone to the table equally— women, men, rich, poor, young and old— was very appealing to her. But that's not all, Kali told me. "When I am baptized, she said, "I want a new name. I want to leave behind the name Kali, Destroyer. After my baptism, I want to be called Grace.

I agreed that there is strong biblical precedent for taking on a new name: Saul became Paul, Sarai became Sarah, and so forth. But something didn't sit right with me about this young woman's request.

I was deeply moved and troubled by the trauma Kali had experienced. And, at face value, some Christians would think this seemed like an evangelist's dream! I mean, if Ellen Degeneres' girlfriend got a toaster oven when Ellen came out, what kind of prize would I get for baptizing a Hindu woman AND changing her name?

But I quickly backed off from that terribly colonialist impulse within Christianity. Because when I listened to Kali, I realized Kali had so much intrinsic worth and value in her already, that had been missed by her family. Kali needed Jesus' healing as much as Grace did. Kali deserved a chance at new life, rather than being disposed of in some tomb. So, rather than replacing Kali with Grace, as she first wanted to do, I began to have conversations about what it would be like for *Kali* to allow Jesus to enter and know her pain, and transform it. Could she let Jesus lead Kali to places of healing, both within the church and therapeutic community. Perhaps she would decide to be Grace too. But I suspected if Kali got left in the tomb for good, then true resurrection might not happen.

Turns out she was so spiritually hungry and thirsty. She just needed the church to say, "Come here child, and you can have all the water, and bread, and juice that you need." And so, Kali's process of not replacement, but of restoration to the image God had already set within her, began.

I have been thinking of a proverb over this Holy Week season. It has been used by activists in Mexico, who are trying to transform violence they see there. They tried to bury us. They didn't know that we were seeds."

This will be my prayer today to all who have been dealt the violence that Jesus experienced at the hands of the authorities, particularly as we have awakened this Easter morning to find out that in Sri Lanka, 3 churches and 4 hotels were bombed. Over 200 have been killed, and over 400 wounded. Though tears will blur our eyes, it will be my prayer that Jesus reveal to us this vision, and let it be our lens through which we live and act: that love is stronger than hate. Goodness is stronger than evil. Life can persist after death. And this sinful and violent world is not beyond God's redemption, even today.

It is time that we shed our tombs and grow towards this vision Jesus has set before us. Let us not dismiss it as an idle tale, but instead something worth believing in and becoming. Amen.