

Easter Sunday
March 23, 2008

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Acts 10:34, 37-43
Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor. 5:6-8
John 20:1-9

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. In today's gospel, Mary and the two disciples make a most disconcerting discovery: the tomb is empty.

I got a slight hint of that disappointment at our kitchen table yesterday morning. Last Lent, a student gave me an elementary school religious education teaching aid—a box of Resurrection Eggs. The idea is that in the days leading up to Easter, one of the twelve colored eggs is opened. Each holds a symbolic trinket linked to the Passion narrative. So, over Holy Week, as we sat together for breakfast and supper, we talked about the role and significance in the gospels of a donkey, silver coins, a Passover cup, a strip of leather, a miniature crown of thorns, dice, and so on. With great anticipation, the twelfth pale blue egg was opened, and it was empty!

My initial response was what a letdown. Why not a small flower, or a little butterfly, something that would exemplify new life? But the truth of the matter is as the Gospel insists: the great hope of Easter is found in an empty tomb.

How could it be otherwise? There were no witnesses to the resurrection, only to the empty tomb. No one can say what happened between God and Jesus in that tomb because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact; yet the gospels record that after the discovery of the empty tomb, people claimed to have visions of the Risen Lord. These scriptural traditions are less interested in the details of Resurrection than in what it meant and what it continues to mean.

We can't verify what happened to Jesus in the Resurrection; we can't claim evidence of the Resurrection on the basis of the empty tomb, nor on the basis of the Resurrection appearances, but there is reliable, unswerving evidence when we look at the lives of those who live out their Resurrection faith. We can trace what happened to those who saw the empty tomb and what happened to those who gave witness to the Resurrection: they fearlessly proclaimed what they initially had not understood. We see it in the transformation of Peter, who went from misunderstanding the Scriptures to interpreting them through the lens of the Resurrection. We see it in Paul, who had set out to put Christians to death, only to become the champion of dying and rising with Christ.

In fact, as the readings we'll hear over the next couple of days indicate, as the disciples encountered the Risen One again and again, they became less afraid, more daring, and, finally, more like him; that is, inclusive, compassionate, and hopeful.

It has been said that the resurrection of Jesus achieves its most verifiable meaning in each new community's embrace of it.

So, what does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us women and men of Providence today? I think we have a hint of it in the sculpture of the Risen Jesus, which has a prominent place in this chapel. We see Jesus' luminous, exultant grace filled strong and gentle. In the backdrop, the star that heralded the night of His birth becomes the dawning sun of his birth into resurrected life. His hands, feet, and face bear a strong resemblance to that of his mother, as illustrated in the statue of Mary at Cana. His stance and gesture complement hers. She is Mary, Mother of Providence; He is God's providence made visible. But of particular significance is his heart—formed by the processional cross presented in thanksgiving to the Sisters of Divine Providence for our contributions to the Pacem in Terris program at LaRoche College, and in remembrance of those who have suffered and continue to suffer the ravages of war, famine, genocide, and poverty, especially children. The risen Jesus, who conquered death, holds them in his heart.

As people of Providence we are called to live inside Resurrection; that is, to be people who look beyond the surface evidence of empty tombs to search for signs of hope and promise.

Easter is Christ going down into the tomb to push life out of the earth. For Easter Christians, Jesus is not on the cross, Jesus is not in the tomb, Jesus is among the living—and that is where we are to be too.

As we make God's Providence more visible in our world. We are drawn with the sorrowing and the suffering to the heart of the Risen Jesus. We make God's Providence visible among the living, by our care for those who are in need, by our advocating for those who have no voice, by living lives of integrity in the midst of deceit, by being inclusive in our compassion and hospitality. Women and men who make God's Providence visible are the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Women and men who make God's Providence visible are the sign to the world that Jesus has risen from the dead and is alive in the world today.

You are all the evidence I need that our Provident God continues to answer death with life. And there's nothing disconcerting or disappointing in that!

Sections adapted from Dianne Bergant, *America*, April 5, 2004: 46.

A Caveat

Over the years, people have asked for copies of my various talks and homiletic "reflections." I've hesitated to put them into print for several reasons: chief among them is rooted in my background as an English major, and the accusation of plagiarism. Unlike papers that I've written for peer and scholarly review, where I've been very careful to note my sources, the talks that I've prepared infrequently reference their sources—which are many. I've found that my process in preparing a talk is akin to the process I use in cooking, where I consult many recipes in books and online, borrowing a hint from one, an ingredient from another. I concoct what feels satisfying to me and those who will join with me at the table.

The process that I typically follow when preparing any kind of oral presentation, especially for worship, involves reading the scripture, reflecting upon it, consulting various commentaries, jotting notes, reading other sermons or homilies in print and online, highlighting relevant passages, reading the blogs of other women theologians and preachers, then letting it all percolate for a time. In between times, I return to old journal entries, story collections, and only then do I sit down to compose—drawing upon a combination of many others' words, thoughts, ideas, stories, and illustrations, and weaving them together for my intended audience. Since most of what I present is intended for the Divine Providence community, I'm always concerned about viewing my topic through the lens of Providence spirituality. That is what I consider my original contribution to these writings.

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