

Giving Up Death

John 20: 1-18

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Have you ever noticed how much time and energy we spend on trying to avoid any kind of surprise in our lives? While the occasional surprise birthday party for a friend might be a delight – although I have seen moments of horror on the face of the honoree before they realized that they are among friends - people, for the most part, don't like surprises. We humans prefer predictability. We want to know what to expect. We like to be in control of what is happening to us on a daily basis. Yet, in spite of all our efforts to arrange a predictable world, very few things end up as we hoped they would. Life, as we want it to be in all its facets, always has that pesky element of surprise in it.

Welcome to Easter! If you don't like surprises, then today is your worst nightmare because today is the day of the greatest surprise ever played on humankind. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ has thrown out even the most basic kind of predictability in regards to life and death.

You know the quote that is ascribed to Benjamin Franklin (but he is not the first one to say it) that the only two things certain in life are death and taxes. (1) Well, today only taxes are left which is truly depressing. Or to say it with the theologian Ann Carter Florence: "If the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on?" (2) Resurrection breaks every rule we know, even those we don't like. It turns our world upside down. It changes everything we know, or think we know.

It might be hard for us to hear the elements of surprise in the Easter story. We know the story. We have heard it and read it a million times. There is no spoiler alert necessary. All four gospels report to us that Jesus rose from the dead. And even though Jesus had said to his followers numerous times that this would happen, nobody expected it. And nobody recognized Jesus as he appeared to his disciples after his death. This is true in all of the four gospels.

Of the four gospel accounts of the Resurrection, I like John's the best. The interaction with Jesus and Mary, who mistakes him at first for the gardener, is kind and tender. Mary's pronouncement that she has seen the Lord is lifted up as the first sermon every preached by a Christ follower, and it is particularly special that it is a women who says it since, in biblical times, women and children did not count. I can't help see a little humor in the fact that at least three of the disciples had to check for themselves, one after the other, that the tomb is empty. They did not believe Mary when she reported Jesus missing, but they also did not believe each other. One after the other had to see for themselves that Jesus was not there.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the center of our faith. Everything hinges on that. Without it we would be followers of a really good, kind, amazing human being - a teacher, a healer, a leader - who showed us how to live life with integrity and compassion. And maybe that is enough, or good enough when it comes to our faith.

Honestly, the event of the resurrection requires of us to let go of any rational, logical thinking. How did someone who died on the cross, come back to life? We know, from experience that the dead stay dead. Resurrection has not happen to the ones we love that have passed away. They, all of them, have remained dead. We can't touch them, talk to them, or hug them. Their bodies are gone. Their physical presence is gone. All we have left is the memories of them.

If resurrection is God's possibility for Jesus, why not for all of us? These are just some fundamental questions we have about Easter story but we don't dare to ask out loud. There are some who might say that if you don't believe in the resurrection as it is reported to us, you can't be a Christian, or you should not be a Christian. We struggle to make sense of what we are being told through scripture and our experience as human beings. Any maybe our faith is stretched to its limit when it comes to make sense of Easter story.

I think the trouble we are having stems from the way we think about the resurrection. If we understand the resurrection as a physical, factual, literal and historical event at which God miraculously transforms the dead body of Jesus back into a breathing living being, we are faithful to the biblical words - and maybe that is enough - but we are not any closer to answering our own questions and reliving our minds of those doubts we might have.

What if we were not to think and believe about the resurrection as a factual event in history but as an experience? Today's scripture reading makes that point, and I think it makes much more sense: the resurrection is all about experience. Because here is what I see: the resurrection then and now manifests itself in the experience of people that Christ remains present in us. (3)

When Mary says, "I have seen the Lord," she speaks of her experience meeting Jesus by the tomb in the garden. It is the moment when faith enters her life, when resurrection becomes a reality for her. It becomes a reality to the disciples when Jesus comes to them – in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, by the beach around the fire. Jesus comes to the apostle Paul, and upon that experience Paul carries the message into the world. We have this faith and this church because Jesus keeps showing up in people's lives. He is not going away. That I believe is a fact. And when Jesus shows up, nothing will ever be the same. The how and when and why Jesus shows up is still a mystery, beyond our ability to explain it or make sense of it. He just does. (4)

This I know to be true for myself the time I sat quietly in the chapel of Bangor Theological Seminary and pondered my future in the world the theological academia and the answer came basically saying, "Go into ministry." That certainly changed the course of my life.

It is assuring and scary at the same time when Jesus shows up. When has Jesus shown up in your life? And what did that do to you? How did it change your life?

As a minister I see resurrection happening all the time – maybe it comes with the territory –when people draw on their faith to work on broken relationships, or find new purpose and joy after the death of a loved one; when healing happens; when peace happens; when good wins over evil; when justice is done; when decency and goodness reign; when hate turns into love.

Resurrection as an experience is the assurance that the life-giving love of God will always move the stones away from the tombs that contain the dead places of our life and world, dead places that fuel our fears and anxiety, our worries and disappointments, our judgments, our additions, our need to control. Once the stones are rolled away, God's light can shine into the darkness and that light, God's light creates new life and new possibilities of hope and peace.

Maybe it is hard for us as individuals to say that, "I have seen the Lord." We don't want to come across sounding a little 'unbalanced' psychologically. But I dare say we are here because of Jesus, and because of the ways he has been present with us in our lives, our church and our world. Where have you seen the Lord in your life?

"I have seen the Lord" confirms that the ways of love and kindness will win over the ruthless rhetoric of hate. "I have seen the Lord" offers another alternative of being in this world – a way that embodies anything and everything that is life giving and life-affirming, demonstrative of mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

So, no I don't want you to go around and say to the next best stranger, "I have seen the Lord; come and join my church!" but I sure want us all to live our lives in ways that show the world that the walls of our tombs have been taken down because of Christ, and that we are ready and willing to bring that resurrection experience to a world in need of it.

I don't believe that we need to have a logical explanation of what happened 2000 years ago but we should be concerned about how we live into this experience of the resurrection.

So friends, as you go into the day's celebration of Easter, may you open your whole self – heart, soul, mind, and strength – to God's inspiring call to new life and renewed love. May you feel God luring you, prompting you, and encouraging you – today, each day and in each new present moment – to practice resurrection. Amen.

Sources:

- (1) The quote is usually attributed to Benjamin Franklin, who wrote in a 1789 letter that "Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." However, *The Yale Book of Quotations* quotes "'Tis impossible to be sure of any thing but Death and Taxes," from **Christopher Bullock**, *The Cobler of Preston* (1716). The YBQ also quotes "Death and Taxes, they are certain," from **Edward Ward**, *The Dancing Devils* (1724).
- (2) www.workingpreacher.com; David Lose, Who's afraid of an Empty Tomb?, March 30, 2010
- (3) The idea to think of the resurrection as experience is based on the theology of Marcus Borg.
- (4) www.workingpreacher.com; commentary by Kathryn Lewis for March 27, 2016