



Easter 2016: Christ Church Cathedral

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Yards are coming back to life. For weeks now, green shoots have been poking through the dull, rain-soaked soil and, we, amazed and pleased, have watched as snow drop and crocus, hyacinth, daffodil and tulip, return again. You would think that we would not be amazed by this thing that happens year after year. But we are.

And so it's Easter, and it's easy, so easy, to make the connection between these natural and energizing rhythms in our own gardens and the story of Jesus' resurrection.

A hymn of the season, a hymn we just sang makes such a connection:

Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

Forth He came at Easter, like the risen grain,
Jesus who for three days in the grave had lain;
Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

It's a beautiful idea and one that strikes us as so, well, believable: the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is a hyperbolic way of saying that, if we wait long enough, our lives and perhaps human history itself, will on their own, yield new life. If we wait long enough what seemed dead but was actually dormant, will come to life again.

I love this idea.....And yet...

Is this *really* what the Easter story is suggesting? Is the story of the resurrection of Jesus "like wheat that springeth green"? Is the story saying the same kind of thing to us that a bulb says when it comes up again after having died back in the winter? And connected to this, are our lives about waiting: waiting long enough after pain, after death, after loss, for new life to emerge, to burst forth again?

Or is the story of Easter getting at something bolder, something stranger, something harder to believe?

If we look at the Easter accounts in Scripture, we see little that suggests that Easter is about natural rhythms or patiently waiting for new life to emerge in its own time through a sort of slow vegetable growth. No, the stories are far more disorienting and terrifying.

Mark writes that when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices they discover the impossible--the stone has been rolled away and an angel is sitting where Jesus should have been lying stiff and cold. Mark tell us they flee in "terror and amazement."

Matthew adds an earthquake, and an angel that terrifies the guards until they shake and become like dead men.

John describes a mystified Mary Magdalene encountering someone she assumes is, of all things, the gardener, the midwife of the earth's natural rhythms. The one she encounters, of course, turns out to be Jesus. When she calls him by a familiar name, he says, "Do not hold on to me," as if to suggest that now, after the resurrection, everything is oriented not toward what is familiar, but toward a new thing that is about to happen.

And then, of course, there's Luke, the writer of this morning's account of the empty tomb. For Luke, resurrection discontinuity comes in the form of two men in dazzling clothes that are suddenly standing beside the women in the empty tomb followed by the women's response—terror so powerful that they bow their faces to the ground.

All of these accounts suggest, it seems to me, that the story of the resurrection of Jesus is not the story of our waiting and watching as new life emerges from what lies dormant. No, instead, the story of the resurrection is about the power of God that acts decisively to open the tombs of our lives and to raise up all in us and in the world that has been bowed down in fear. In this sense, the resurrection is not natural at all, but discontinuous, definitive and

saving. It *should* leave us speechless and disoriented for, by definition, it comes to us as something unexpected and unexplainable.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth once put it this way: the gospel, he said "is not a natural 'therefore' but a miraculous 'nevertheless'." Out of this, I believe, we as people of the resurrection are those whose lives are marked by both the gift and enactment of God's "nevertheless" in the face of the entombing, paralyzing, deterministic "therefore's" in our lives.

And so this morning if you find yourself entombed by loneliness, to this, Jesus' resurrection says: "I have already secured your place in a living human family. Reach out your hand and find them all around you."

If this morning you are bowed down by self-doubt or self-hatred, to this, Jesus' resurrection says, "I have already lifted you up and secured your identity and your worth. Stand up and walk as my son or daughter or child."

If this morning you are entombed by grief, or laid low by loss or abject fear on account of things that have happened to you personally, things that happened to your people or things that keep occurring in this world of ours, to this, Jesus' resurrection says, "I have taken these upon myself and into me, and I have allowed myself to be laid low by them. Look, they cannot overcome me. Arise, go outside into the light that I myself have bought for you."

By the end of this day here at Christ Church Cathedral, we will have baptized seven, yes, seven people—three adults and four children. Whether adult or child, all of them will in the years to come need these very same miraculous "neverthelesses," as Barth calls them, divine rebuttals that lead to invitations to us to stand up and walk out of the tombs of our loneliness, the tombs of our self-hatred and the tombs of our grief, loss and fear. To do this, they, like we, will need the assurance that though much of God's grace comes to us through slow, vegetable growth, *nevertheless* in their baptismal birth, God has already unsealed all their tombs and has already lifted up everything within them that has been bowed down in fear or has been cast down by fear.

At the end of Luke's story of the resurrection, the women tell the apostles what they have seen and heard—the empty tomb, the two men in dazzling garments, and the words reminding them that they heard of the resurrection from Jesus' own lips before his death. Luke tells us is that upon hearing this, the apostles do not believe them, regarding their story as nothing more than an idle tale.

We cannot blame them, for their reaction is yet another testament to just how discontinuous, and disorienting the tale of the resurrection is. It *is* an idle and fanciful tale. *Nevertheless*, this and no other is the defining story of our lives this morning. Christ is risen. Raise yourselves up, walk from your tomb, take your place among the living. He has gone and is going before you.

Works Cited or Consulted

Thanks to Ted Wardlaw and Barbara Brown Taylor who both developed the idea that the resurrection is “unnatural,” the former in an article in *The Christian Century* and the latter in an Easter sermon.