

Meditation by Rev. Gloria Hopewell

Easter Sunday “Called by Name”

Text- John : 20: 1-18

There she was, then, in those gray moments just before dawn, when the faintest blush of light peered above the city walls, and the lowing of sheep in the valley was the only sound except for her own breath and footsteps on the stone path. Her basket of spices and ointments weighed heavily on her arm and she shivered, partly from the chill of the morning air, partly from fear and fatigue.

There was some small comfort in carrying out her task. The familiar routine helped her to focus her thoughts and overcome her despair, if only for a little while. There had not been time to anoint Jesus’ body before the Sabbath when no work could be done, not even tending to the bodies of the dead. But now she would do it to honor the one she loved above all others. She would anoint him and then go back home to try to put her life back together. She knew this wasn’t entirely rational, going so early in the morning.

Who would roll back the stone that sealed the tomb? She surely would not be strong enough to do it by herself. But going—doing something—was better than continuing to toss and turn on her bed, unable to sleep. If she had to, she would just wait in the garden until someone else came.

Her steps faltered now and then as she was overcome with fresh waves of grief. Her thoughts kept returning to the confusion and horror of the past days. How could it have happened? How could it be true that Jesus was dead—humiliated and beaten, then tortured and nailed to a cross? How could these three wondrous years be ended so quickly, so finally? This man, who had given her back her hope, her dignity, yes, even her life, was now gone. And how could the people change so quickly? The same people who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem—who sang and shouted and laughed, so quickly turned to scorn and hatred and cruelty. To an unreasoning, bloodthirsty mob! Maybe it could have been stopped. “Maybe we could have saved him,” she thought. “If only...if only we had been braver. If we had raised our voices louder. If some of the disciples hadn’t run away in fear! How could we fail him after all he gave us?”

When she came to the garden and neared the tomb, her eyes filled with tears. She looked toward the tomb but it was a few moments before her mind registered what she saw. The huge stone that sealed the mouth of the tomb had been rolled away! What could it mean? She ran, then. Back to the city. Back to Peter and John and James, who might know what to do.

But the disciples were skeptical. “You haven’t had enough sleep, Mary. Your eyes are playing tricks on you!” Some of them even smirked and said, “Women! What imaginations they have.” Still, Peter and John went back to take a look, and she followed behind them. Both of them went into the tomb, saw that what she had reported was true,

and then went back home without saying a word to her. Yet again, her eyes filled with tears, and she finally summoned the courage to peak inside the tomb—and to confirm her greatest fear! Jesus' body was gone! In the seconds that followed, many thoughts swirled through her mind. Had his body been stolen? Or— hadn't he told them something— hadn't he said mysterious things about the temple being rebuilt in three days? Didn't he say that the Son of Man would be turned over to sinners and crucified, but would rise on the third day? No one had really understood what he meant.

She lingered there beside the tomb. She would watch and wait until someone told her where Jesus had been taken. And because she waited, she saw what Peter and John had not. They had seen only the wrapped up linens in the empty tomb. She saw two angels and then, the gardener—or one she assumed to be the gardener. This “gardener” called her by name. “Mary,” he said. And instantly, she knew him.

He called her by name. And everything changed. Everything came clear as she experienced for herself the risen Christ. She was the first disciple to receive the good news. This was Easter. The Resurrection moment.

Some of us struggle with the Resurrection, don't we? For some of us, it is the most difficult faith question that we encounter. We don't know what to do with it. We wonder if we can be Christians without whole-heartedly accepting it—without believing in this illogical event that does not conform to natural laws.

What do we mean by believing in the Resurrection? Would we be happier if we had a videotape from inside the tomb? If it showed Jesus slowly awaking and sitting up, carefully folding the linen cloths and setting them aside. Or if we saw a flash of light and a heavenly aura as he faded out of sight?

Maybe we get too hung up on the details. Was the tomb really empty? What did Jesus look like when Mary saw him in the garden? Was his body different, somehow? We wonder, too, when we think about what Jesus' “victory over death” that we sing about in our Easter hymns, has to do with us—what will happen to us when we leave this earth? Will we have bodies? Where will we go? Will we see and recognize our friends and family members? Are the Jesus scholars, some of whom say none of this ever happened, correct? Or are the apocalyptic Christians with their talk of the second coming, Armageddon, and the rapture right? Who knows? No matter how intelligent the scholars and how faithful the apocalyptic believers, it is all speculation. No one can know for certain what will happen after death.

Maybe we are looking for Jesus in all the wrong places—among the dead instead of the living. In the empty tomb instead of in the lives of those who experienced his presence. The lives of those who proclaimed the Good News and who told the stories that caused the church to form and grow. The lives of those whose faithful witness through the ages and today allows that church to continue 2,000 years later. Perhaps we should leave life after death to take care of itself and look at the Resurrection that is possible in our present lives and relationships.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that whatever happened in the tomb was strictly between God and Jesus. There were no witnesses. Those who came to see arrived after the fact. Others saw nothing at all because they were still in bed. But none of that matters. Jesus was not there.

He had outgrown his tomb, which was too small a focus for the resurrection, she says. The risen one had people to see and things to do. The living one's business was among the living.... What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the gardener said, "Mary!" and she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening—not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord (Christian Century, April 1, 1998, p. 339).

Calling someone by name is very powerful. It means that the person is recognized, known. It has to do with identity, with dignity and personhood. It has to do with respecting and caring enough to make a small effort. I know how I feel when my relatively simple name gets messed up, which is amazingly often! Particularly the dreaded and hated "Hopwell!"

Some time ago, I took the Night Ministry's volunteer training. One of the things they stressed was the importance of using the names of the homeless and the street people they served. For that made a step toward recognizing their humanity and taking them out of the faceless throng of the down and out. It tells them that they do have value and worth in the eyes of God and God's people, even if the general society denies it.

The risen One knows our names. We are not so different from Mary and Peter and John, are we? God gives us the gift of holy transcendent moments, too. But we must pay close attention!

Why do we come here on Easter morning? Why do some of us come on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday to hear the old stories once again? Oh, I'm sure that some of you come on Maundy Thursday for the Agape Meal—and for the fellowship of this traditional celebration. That is important, too.

But some come for a word of hope, an assurance that suffering and death are not the last word. We come with our own burdens—pain, grief, disappointment, despair— maybe anxiety about what comes next in our lives. We come to be with others in this community of faith to affirm that God's love is stronger than death and that we are never alone.

The first Easter began in darkness and tears for Mary. It moved out of that darkness into the brilliant light of the unexpected and unimaginable. The Resurrection brought new life and hope out of death and despair—and it continues to do so. Jesus beckons beyond the empty tomb into abundant life.

Sometimes, when we confront the mysteries of faith, those things that defy our need to “prove” and understand with our intellect and logic, we can turn to the artists, the musicians, the poets. For with their art, they reach out to touch the sublime and the divine and bring it back to us in bold strokes of sound and color and melody.

Hear these words of poet Ann Weems:

Death abides not on a hill called Golgotha, but in every heart that makes room.

Life abides not outside a garden tomb in Jerusalem, but in every heart that makes room.

And...

Let it begin with singing and never end!

Oh, angels, quit your lamenting!

Oh, pilgrims, upon your knees in tearful prayer, rise up and take your hearts and run!

We who were no people are named anew God’s people, for he who was no more is forevermore.

The risen One calls each of us by name, if we will only listen. If we will only open our hearts and minds to the Resurrection moments that are all around us. If we will only dry our tears and see this new vision—,of hope and joy and love—of life: abundant life today and life and love eternal!

For Christ is risen, my friends! Christ is risen, indeed!

Alleluia and amen.