

Sermon: "He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!"

Here is the lens through which I invite you to see, and explore, and celebrate(!), this Easter Sunday morning. It is a lens we have used before. It seeks to find-and-see-and-understand '*things* that make all the difference to our living'. It has curiosity, reflecting on, "What, about *our* lives, is being exercised *here*, in what we are looking at *there*?" It looks to soak up not just knowledge but lived experience and wisdom that – in turn – inform and empower us, all across our days.

We used this lens in the season of Lent, just past. *In* Lent, year after year ... *and right here is the utilization of this lens(!)* ... **we practice** wilderness. We do so because there will come wilderness times in our lives, indeed there can be long eras of it (not just 40 days, but 40 years). It is so helpful and useful for us to *know* that **being there is part of life**; to *know* about the barrenness and threat of that sometimes-*seemingly-endless* landscape; to be familiar with our felt puniness (our vulnerability) when out there; also to know that GOD IS THERE underneath, behind, beside and ahead.

On Good Friday, year after year ... again, use the lens(!) ... **we practice** death. How important this is! In my work as a hospital chaplain, I encounter so many people who get blindsided by their own mortality (including Christians who have managed to 'miss out' on this aspect at the crux – *literally* the crux! – of their faith). The philosopher and psychotherapist Mark Vernon recently wrote (in his book on Spiritual Intelligence), "understanding the meaning of death ... is a key focus in any wisdom tradition worth taking seriously." (p 127) "Spiritual intelligence knows that ... death is not the end of more but the path to more." (pp 127,129) People who have not explored *and at least to some extent integrated* this (and let me point out that I have been with *children* as well as *elders* who **have** done so) [... (**but**) people who have **not** addressed this] can have a troubled, fearful final chapter to their days.

Then, across the three days (by Hebrew counting) from Good Friday to early Easter Sunday morning, year after year we **practice grief**. People,

you well know there are many losses in life, lots of *minor* ones and some *catastrophic* ones. To be hit by significant loss without any practice in its terrain (emotionally, mentally, socially and spiritually) ... again, as a chaplain, I encounter people for whom such total unfamiliarity is true, and their grief completely overwhelms them.

Our Gospel story, today, begins with us there alongside Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, *in **their** grief*. This year (year A of the Common Lectionary), we hear Matthew's telling of this story, with transparent awareness on our part – *from across the years* – that each evangelist tells the story very differently. *Here*, unlike in Mark's account, the women did not buy spices right after Sabbath ended (the night before) *and* now come, before dawn, to anoint the body. Here in Matthew's story, they come simply "to see the tomb". Oh(!), we know that grief. It is the grief of people we know regularly visiting their beloved's gravesite. Pause to consider the two Mary's more closely: It is not only one whom they love who was put to rest in there, it is one who healed bodies, hearts and spirits, who *made present* the very love of God ... they *believed* in him and his Way, they were committed to follow him all their days; but he was violently taken from them and then executed before their eyes, and now all was lost ... altogether nightmarish! The hurt was raw and deep. Going to the tomb was the closest they could get to him; and they ached to feel *anything* of that closeness. So they went. We are right there with them.

And then – with dawn and their graveyard arrival – come the **experiences** with which Easter blesses them and us, *letting us practice crucially important things*, year after year. First, I'll again recall the experiences – there are three of them – and then, using our lens, let us see and celebrate the practices:

1. Experience Number One:

The divine reaches in, *changing up everything*. Matthew writes that the earth quaked as an angel, looking like lightening, came

down and rolled back the stone that sealed the tomb. The guards are paralyzed with fear. The Mary's are afraid too, but then ...

2. Experience Number Two:

... their grief is radically rewritten. Yes, life will never be the same as before; but Jesus [the angel says] is "going ahead of [them] to Galilee"; Jesus will be there with them, *at home with them*, right across their lives moving forward. What they are directed to do is "(i) move (ii) *forward*". Their resulting *state-of-being*?: "[T]hey left the tomb quickly with **fear** and **great joy**, and ran to tell his disciples."

In Mark-the-Gospel-writer's telling, the story ends right here after emphasizing the terror and amazement of the women. Mark has no appearance, at all, by a resurrected Christ. Here, in Matthew's telling, the women are – yes – fast on their way (***running*** to tell the disciples about 'going back to Galilee where they will find *Jesus continuing with them!*') when they have ...

3. Experience Number Three:

... an immediate encounter with Jesus. He "suddenly" appears – oh how welcome it is when a bereft person has this kind of vision (I expect you have heard grieving people in our time tell of such things if you haven't actually had it happen to you) – and Jesus encourages them not to fear any more, just to get on (in their joy) ... to move forward.

These story elements take us by the hand to *experience* (to '*spiritually practice*') two things every Easter. The first experience (the lightning-bolt angel) is the possibility of the universe handing us something magnificent ("mind blowing") that could never have been expected or imagined. (Probably my 'highest ever' taste of this was, there with Lynn, at the birth of our children.) It is good to be practiced at being open to such times, awed by them, and overjoyed by them. Number Two is the experience (not just the thought but the experience) that

death, and our grief over death, are not the end. That same philosopher previously quoted, Mark Vernon, says it this way: "Death [simply] clears away ... all that is not wholly, blazingly, intimately life." (p 141) *<repeat the quote!>* **Pivotal**ly important for our living, **centrally** important to our faith is this awareness(!) and, so again, how important it is that we have practice of it.

Do you recall the idea of "thin places"? The concept entered Christianity via the Celtic saints who used it to describe places where there is only a thin veil between us and the divine. Marcus Borg, the theologian, writes that they are places where God feels near, where we know God right in our bones, where God is both deep inside and all around. In the world's Nature religions, the spring and autumn equinoxes are annual 'thin times'. In Christianity, Easter Sunday is – above any other – our ritual thin time. Here we see, and are helped to get it right down into our bones, that God's Providence is full-bore and unstoppable ... **death does not end it.** On Easter Sunday it is our rehearsed experience that the universe indeed works, and the earth indeed runs, just as the biblical record consistently tells:

- from captivity to release,
- from exile to return,
- from death to resurrection,
- from 'ending' to 'a remnant goes on'.

Remember Paul's exclamation?:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

... [T]hanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [I Cor 15:54-57]

The biblical accounts of dawn that first Easter Sunday ... they are all very different in detail, but they are unanimous in the experience of the veil between heaven and earth being lifted and, for those experiencing it, their lives being totally changed.

'Thin place' encounters with Jesus-beyond-the-grave thereafter continued, no two writers telling the same things. We have the Emmaus Road story, there are varying Jerusalem stories told by Luke and John, there are varying Galilee stories told by Matthew and John. Then in Acts, chapter 1, Luke writes, "After [Jesus'] suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Then come appearances to Paul on the Road to Damascus, and regular/ongoing Altered State of Consciousness experiences of Jesus by members of the Johannine community, and by the Gnostics (who wrongly took the experience to mean they were already in heaven).

Turn then to us. We, in the modern west, have been socialized away from Altered State of Consciousness experiences. But this does not mean we do not have 'thin place' *exposures*. It happens for me in study, with – yes – the *advantages*(!) of the modern west, in having something like the Jesus Seminar, and all the advances in Social Sciences of the past half century. This broad interdisciplinary community-of-scholars' combined work has brought Jesus into such clear focus. I know I am enthralled and "made alive" by encounter with this One-who-reveals-the-divine. His Way is truth and life ... I believe in him above all others. So yes, study can be a 'thin place'. But [and, people, here this tangent I've taken you on comes squarely back to the target!] *experientially* and *communally* (indeed, circling the entire globe, in solidarity and with great joy this day), we Christians **rehearse** the Easter story and **we are met by the risen Christ**. And we **practice** the great **resulting gift of Joy**. (Oh, in our world which is so persistently a grievous place, we need this rehearsal of Joy ... I pray you felt it right down in your bones this morning as the two Mary's "left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy".) Not only Joy, but **here we also practice the momentous resulting gift of Hope**. (And, oh, in a world where humanity's growing awareness is of our "meta-crisis", **here** we need such practice of Hope. I'll tell you it is the cord my soul clings to [and I do intentionally grab hold of it in each morning's meditations] to stay grounded, knowing that – whatever comes – Providence's pattern

persists: from captivity to release, from exile to return, from death to resurrection, from ‘ending’ to ‘a remnant goes on’.)

People, you know the great Easter refrain; let us again repeat it (make spiritual practice of it) with deep Joy and in broad Hope:

L: The Lord is risen!)
) 3x
 P: He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!)

Amen.