

Seeing What We Cannot Anticipate

Job 14:11-17; 19:23-27; Luke 23:50-24:12

For all of Holy Week, we have read about men and women in varying stages of disorientation, trying to cope with a roller coaster ride that will land Jesus, a carpenter's step-son, at the right hand of the Almighty, the one human being to date who has died and come out the other side of the grave and has passed through the clouds to receive "*the crown of life*" that our ancestor Adam somehow fumbled away. We have seen so many paintings of Jesus, halo on his head, wounds on his hands and feet and side, surrounded by angels, looked up at by adoring saints that it is easy to miss the heart wrenching experience the men and women who knew him there and then must have felt.

They all had arrived in Jerusalem last Sunday, behind Jesus in a traditional Israelite coronation parade, singing the songs that old Israel had always sung to welcome their kings into the capital. And Jesus had looked and acted and spoke and taught like God's own vassal king, ruling the temple porch like a tornado, driving shallow, thoughtless, self-serving profiteers away from his Father's house, clearing a space where foreigners and outcasts and underdogs from afar could worship God.

And the apostles, Jesus' government-in-waiting, expected that the whole week would be like Sunday, that Jesus would simply clean out one pocket of resistance after the other, so to be crowned before the Passover and to lead his disciples, God's own new chosen people, on some Exodus journey that would turn the whole world back into the garden sanctuary that Adam had let get away so long ago. What they hadn't studied on, what they were always unwilling to hear, is how Jesus intended to get that job done. They were like Isaac following Abraham up Mount Moriah.

They saw the props, they saw that some kind of sacrifice, some sort of Passover, was on the way, but they lost track of who would be the sacrifice, who would pay the price, so that God's people could put sin behind them and find the freedom to live out what God wanted them to be. So at the last supper, the apostles, Jesus' government-in-waiting saw their king in his tunic, kneeling in front of them with a bowl to wash their feet. Peter knew he was in trouble right there! He rebelled at the very notion of a kingdom where his majesty washed people's feet. Only a sharp word from Jesus brought Peter back in line.

The whole supper went upside down. The bread without leaven became Jesus' body without sin, broken and eaten by them. The celebratory cup, the old toast to freedom, became Jesus' blood, poured out much as the blood of the Passover lambs would be poured out on old Israel's altar the

next day. Worse than that, one of them wasn't one of them. One of them would throw Jesus over, he told them. So they all started looking at themselves and each other, asking who was best, who could be trusted.

Well, you all know how it went. You all know how it ended. The danger being that its such an old story, so long so familiar, that we could harden ourselves to the shock the Cross must have been for the people who had to see it. We could lose track of the fact that people like us can be told something over and over, shown something over and over, but if it's strange to what we expect, foreign to our liking, we will choose to believe what we wanted to hear, choose to expect what we hoped might happen. Nobody there wanted a cross for their king. Strangely, we call the dizzying downward spiral they experienced, Good Friday.

And it was oh so very, very good...for us. We now know that Jesus' terrible suffering was an offering to his Father that became a gift to us. He trusted and believed in his Father, he loved and obeyed his Father, he loved and served us. And it was that life, his character that gets bestowed on us should we ever believe the gospel and throw in with Christ. And the sin that characterizes us, our want of faith, our lack of love, our unwillingness to give or serve or obey, that, Jesus bore to the cross so that on Judgment Day none of it would apply to any one of us who belongs to Christ.

Good Friday. We can be forgiven, we can start over, we can learn over time from God what goodness and honesty and loyalty are really about, if we'll just give our lives to Christ and follow him. Good for us, but impossible to grasp for the people who had to live through the day.

All they knew, all they could see was the cold, pale body of the man whose presence and actions and words and power made life make sense whenever he was around them. Jesus was more than an abstract, ideal Savior to the men and women who had paraded into the city the Sunday before. He was their living, breathing human king. They loved him. Their hopes rode on his progress, his well being. And now all that lay before them pale and cold and lifeless, a problem they had to solve before Sabbath fell and the Romans solved it for them.

None of the apostles, no one from Jesus' family had the connections to get past the Romans and bring his body somewhere safe and dignified. So two Sanhedrin members, known to be friendly to Jesus' cause were contacted and sent to Pilate to secure a burial for him better than the landfill where most Roman prisoners landed. It was costly. For Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, it was likely the end of their careers as Israelite scribes and leaders. Old Israel had no room on their ruling council for the disciples of an ill mannered carpenter's step son.

Joseph gave away the handsome, priceless, stone tomb he had likely bought and prepared for himself. Nicodemus bought 75 pounds of spices and perfume, an amount more suited to an

Israelite king than a carpenter's stepson. And their every step was shadowed by the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to the Holy City. The text says the women "*beheld*" the tomb. The word might better have been translated, they "inspected" the tomb, they watched, Luke tell us, "*how*" Jesus body was laid. The sense between the lines was that there was a ferocity to the devotion these women held for Jesus. And the devotion wasn't just female.

The disciples and Jesus' brothers would have been there, if they could. But there was no way the Romans would tolerate a platoon of Jesus' disciples anywhere near his body that day. So Jesus was buried as best as catch can in the few hours they had before Sabbath fell and the city went into lockdown. And then followed the long sad hours of waiting and trying to digest that their king, who had healed the sick and raised the dead and multiplied the loaves and walked on water had somehow contrived to make himself a martyr without founding his kingdom.

No one knows what they said or thought through two long evenings and one interminable Sabbath day. What we do know is that the women were awake before the dawn, still fiercely determined that Jesus would enjoy every gesture of care, possess every mark of dignity that an Israelite woman could provide a loved one. They're being outside the city that early on Sunday was only just legal. And in the morning twilight, it was shock after shock for the women.

The immense stone they had worried about all the way there was rolled away and lay all cockeyed and akimbo where no one there could have put it. Luke says simply, "*Going in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus!*" Easy for us to read. For them, in that moment, the one solace they could take in the loss of their loved one wasn't there for them to take. They were "*at a loss*" the text tells us "*when two men in dazzling apparel stood before them.*"

The women went on their faces in the tomb while the men, angels, Luke will tell us later, chided them for not knowing what Jesus had so often taught them, "*Remember how he told you when he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise?*" And at that moment they did remember, and they went racing back to the house with the upper room which had served as a funeral parlor for them all weekend.

The text pauses to identify the women. Luke names three: Mary Magdalene comes first. Luke had already identified her as a woman, originally subject to demonic influences, who had followed Jesus for years. Joanna also had been with Jesus about that long and had connections to Herod's palace in Galilee, perhaps wealthy connections that had kept Jesus' ministry afloat in the early years. Last one named was "*Mary, mother of James*". I actually think that this Mary was Jesus' mother.

Luke calls her the mother of James because after the Resurrection, the Holy Family seems to have become shy about identifying themselves with Jesus. James and Jude both wrote New Testament letters to the early Christians without ever identifying themselves as Jesus' brothers. And you'll remember that in John's crucifixion story, Jesus bequeaths his mother into the care of an apostle even though his brothers were alive and believers and perfectly capable of taking care of her. The point being to emphasize the gospel fact that Jesus is family, an elder brother to everyone who throws in with him.

Christ belongs to all of us now and we are family to one another as well. Well, I'd like to close by observing that there is a sort of flash-mob feeling to Luke's resurrection story that I find heart warming and occasionally helpful. Because obviously with Jesus out the grave and the roller coaster suddenly going straight up after having spiraled straight down on Friday, wonderful things are afoot, wonderful possibilities come into reach. But in John's gospel, the story is neat and tidy.

The tomb in the cemetery "*garden*" is a perfect living replica of old Israel's Ark of the Covenant, two angels sitting primly at either end of the body-slab very politely asking Mary why she was upset. And Jesus makes his first appearance as the "*gardener*"/bridegroom, there to embrace Mary who is standing in for all of us as the bride Jesus came to bring back to the Garden. John's story is so precise, such a clear picture of Jesus returning us to Eden.

Luke has the women, more than just three of them, running all over the landscape, telling what they'd seen to everyone in the upper room and nobody believes them. Peter at least stirs himself to check the story, but he leaves the cemetery scratching his head, not quite sure what he's just seen. If we kept reading, we'd have the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who walk all afternoon with the risen Jesus, but they don't know who he is. They don't recognize him till they get to the inn and Jesus breaks bread in front of them right before he vanishes!

And then, it's another foot race to the upper room, where the two guys from Emmaus arrive all breathless and confused, to hear that other disciples have seen Jesus. And then Jesus just appears in front of them, locked door and all! And they all start crashing through tables and jumping furniture to get away from him, because they're still not sure what's happening, Jesus has to talk them off the ceiling. Because they're human. Because real live breathing people don't go from deep dark grief to triumphant mastery in a single day. We have to muck through what's happening to us. And everyone in the gospel is allowed to be a human being.,

Now an over-religious person might point out that this chaos takes place before the Holy Spirit had descended on them all. And it is absolutely true that they all get better after Pentecost. They all become much more confident and powerful and clear about Christ and Church and Cross and

Resurrection once the Holy Spirit formally descends on them. But it is also true that they continue to be human.

Read the book of Acts. The Hebrew Christians struggle to get along with Greek Disciples. And Paul and Barnabas and Mark and Peter are all subject to a world of misunderstandings, that they had to work out. The point being, that the object of Resurrection and Pentecost, Holy Spirit and Bible, prayer and healing, the point of all those things it is not to make us something better than human, always right and tidy and functional. Faithfulness is something different and better than tidiness and mastery. It is zeal for what God defines as right tempered by compassion for what is only human.