

WHAT GOD DOES WITH BURIED THINGS

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Matthew 28:1-10

Good morning, Happy Easter, and welcome to all! Welcome to old comers and newcomers, to visitors, townspeople, to grandparents and grandchildren, in-laws and out-laws, the curious, and the doubtful. Welcome to believers and welcome to atheists. Welcome to those seeking a venue for your Easter finery. And welcome especially to those of you who have come here wondering if Jesus was really raised from the dead or whether this whole thing is just some kind of “metaphor” for the fact that finally spring has come (sort of), the daffodils are back, and Memorial Day weekend is just around the corner.

The resurrection goes against everything we believe is possible and so it's easy to reject it as fact. I remember preaching about the reality of the resurrection many years ago in a church in the city, and after the service an elderly lady said to me, “Honey, if Jesus knew what you just said about him being resurrected, he would turn over in his grave!”

Well, that sweet lady was right, in a sideways kind of way. Because Easter is the story of what God does with buried things.

But let's begin at the beginning. And that means remembering that the Easter story begins in tremendous pain.

The two women named Mary decide to make their first visit to Jesus' grave. As you probably know from your own experience (I certainly do), the first visit to a fresh grave is a terrible thing. It's almost worse than the burial itself. The burial seems connected, somehow, with the person's life. And a burial is ritualized with prayer and with the presence of other mourners, all of which can provide some protection against the anguish of what has happened.

But the first visit to the grave after that is terrible because it means crossing a kind of threshold, the

threshold between life and death. When you go to someone's grave for the first time, you realize that you go there to visit someone who is lost forever, at least in the flesh. We each have a past, a present, and a future. When you go to a grave, you realize that for the person who has died, there is no more future. For them, there is only the past, and it is sealed. Their only future *is* their past, and that strange future is lived only in the memories of those who loved them. It's almost as if their death has overcome their life – such is the power of death. Death holds the person in a kind of void. And so death interrupts time, it makes a huge painful tear in the fabric of our continuity. The two women who went to Jesus' tomb in the dawn went there ready to step over that threshold, to begin to understand Jesus as lost forever.

We have made a tame little fairy tale out of the resurrection, and so we ignore the witness of Scripture as to the terror and awe the women felt when they got to the grave. They see an angel actually plummeting to earth. And what is an angel? An angel is the intentionality of God, coming to us. Or you could say an angel is the purposes of God, or the proclamation of God, coming to us. And the angel in this story is not a polite little well-dressed one with his hair neatly coiffed and his gown neatly ironed and his hands neatly folded in prayer kneeling on a little gold kneeler like you see on Easter cards.

Nope. It's a crazy-looking angel. A wild-eyed angel with his red hair all weird and electrified like lightning and his angel wings lit up like supernovas, and he trails sparks and explosions as he descends through the dim sky of dawn. He drops to the ground and hauls back the stone that has sealed Jesus' grave and then he jumps up on the stone and as the guards all pass out with fear and as the women scream in terror he says, “Don't be afraid! I know who you are; I know what you're here for! But look, Jesus has been raised! And he'll see you back home.”

And so this visit to the grave of a dead person does not go as planned. The women may have been ready to cross the threshold into that state of permanent grief and lostness in which much of this warring world resides and for which our God-deprived culture has provided us with so many inadequate anesthetics to keep us in a stupor of spiritual poverty. As Hegel said, “By the little that now satisfies the soul, judge the extent of its loss.” The women may have been ready for that loss, but God gives them something else. Because that’s what God does with buried things.

We don’t usually think of Easter in terms of comedy, but this is a really funny gospel. Because even though the angel has done what Jesus has told him to do, even though he’s delivered Jesus’ message to the women, that’s not the end of the story. As the women leave to bring the message to the other disciples, Jesus pops up out of nowhere. And it’s almost as if he’s been nearby all the time, hiding behind a shrub, listening in on the conversation, getting himself together after his resurrection and planning to see his friends later, in Galilee. But when he sees the women, his dear friends, he just can’t wait. He jumps up from behind his little hiding place and he runs over to them and says “Greetings!” – which was the first-century form of “Hi!”

Now this is no burning bush. This is not a stately religious experience. This is not a hidden faceless God speaking from a mountaintop. This is the Lord of life, fresh from the grave, pulled up from the earth like a sprouting tulip (and that *is* a metaphor), with dirt on his face and his heart just reestablishing its proper rhythm and his DNA all rearranged to suit his new spiritual body – and the first thing he wants to do is *not* zoom up to His Father in heaven so he can be safe once again from the treachery of human beings. The first thing he wants to do is *not* to return to Pilate and the chief priests to say, “Well, I guess *I* was right!” The first thing he wants to do is see his friends. Even barely a few days’ absence has been too much for him to bear. He just can’t wait to embrace them. The void is filled with love. Death is embraced by life. Because that is what God does with buried things.

This is what being saved means: Not just that Jesus died on the cross for the sin of the world, but that God returned him to us because God couldn’t bear to lose him or us to anything, including death. If there is

such a thing as love, then love restores, always. And we, like Jesus, are restored in order to embrace – embrace our humanity, embrace each other, embrace the world God gave into our care. This is the only way life makes any sense at all.

Otherwise, what would being human mean? Even in a small town like this, we don’t know each other, most of us. We live within the hiddenness of our very private lives. But we all know the same human struggle – to live each day sanely, to somehow make our lives cohere, to connect, to give, to create something, to be faithful to each other, to make it through the suffering that comes to each of us with some integrity. How could each of us be just a flash in the pan? How could so much meaning mean nothing? As Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” We are meant for a much larger life than most of us ever allow ourselves. That is what resurrection is. God is never going to let us go. He is always pulling us and all creation up from some kind of death. Because that is what God does with buried things.

And so the resurrection isn’t a happy ending pasted onto the story of Jesus because he was the Son of God and besides that a really good guy. The resurrection is God’s way of telling us that we are wrong to understand the world the way we usually do, in terms of the threat of pain and death, in terms of power and the limits that power imposes on us. Rather, we must understand the world in terms of embrace. In terms of things being put back together. In terms of things coming home again. And once we do that, we want something different. *We are* different. If you are saved *from* something, that means you’re saved *for* something, and it’s this: To come home to your humanity, to become a real human being who embraces other human beings in the name of God. Because that is what God does with buried things.

I think one of the reasons why the resurrection is so difficult to wrap our heads around is that it’s not an abstraction. It’s something living. And so you have to find it within your own life. This may be one of the biggest secrets ever. The resurrection is inside you. God put it there when you were baptized. It’s not going to come from anywhere else. Not from a book, or from something you have heard or learned or been taught. It’s here, in our hearts, if we have the courage

to both confront and honor our lives as they really are.

If you can go to that place, you will find Jesus, who strides into every dark place where death reigns in our lives and in our world, into those corners of loss and sin that shadow us all. Those places where we seem to have no future and we feel the nag of the vile and know our own complicity in the failures that no human life can escape. Those places where you know that each small death your life contains connects with the enormous pain of our divided civilization, with all the human beings who even now as we speak go down to the grave at the hands of their fellow humans. But Jesus walks into all those places where the past is unredeemed, where in a failure of hope we have interred our lives and perhaps even the life of our culture, and he surprises us with what we most

long for: new life with others. Because that's what God does with buried things.

If you look at the cover of your leaflet, you will see a reproduction of the famous della Francesca picture of the Resurrection. In it we see the great stone tomb, the stunned or sleeping guards around it on the ground like felled ragdolls. And Jesus is stepping out of the tomb, one foot still in the grave, the other on the edge of the grave with his arm resting majestically and gracefully on his knee. He looks supremely confident and in control. He looks as if he is filled with love and guts and intelligence and faith. He looks like he's really fought something and won. And he looks you straight in the eye and he says, "I know who you are! Look, this is what God does with buried things!"

Amen.