

EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20: 1-18

Almost exactly a year ago, not even weeks into this pandemic, we were already wondering about something we were calling the "new normal." Do you remember that? And we were wondering what effect all the disruptions to our lives, our routines, our social networking would have once we returned to whatever was coming after the pandemic.

And now that we are inching closer to at least a cautious return to in-person worship, we are probably thinking again about how or whether things will return to normal. Or we may be wondering what "normal" even means any more.

And then, in the middle of all this anxious wrestling, we are confronted with images of a normalcy that we would rather not return to—the too-familiar images of a supermarket, surrounded by police cars with lights flashing, while terrorized shoppers dash out, hands over their heads. And then the stories of what transpired inside that building, the unspeakable being put into words that break hearts. And perhaps the most heart-breaking part of it is how routine it has become—a new normal.

Add to this the nightmare that is dredged up again, as the images of a Black man struggling under the knee of a White man get played out in a trial. Or images of an Asian-American woman brutally assaulted in broad daylight, while bystanders turn and look the other way.

Around the world today, Christians of all sorts, in hundreds of languages, proclaim in sermons and hymns and affirmations of faith that Jesus Christ is risen, and that in the resurrection he has triumphed over all that is unjust and dark and evil. And yet, do we see any evidence that any of this is true? Or has nothing at all changed?

This past week, having revisited the Passion story where violence and hatred and death are put center stage, we have to ask: Does the one who walked this path before us have

anything to say to a world that seems unable or unwilling to let go of violence? Or has nothing changed at all? Is the violence, the hatred, the racism just a continuation of the old normal?

When Mary Magdalen went to the tomb of Jesus early on that first Easter morning, she went with the expectation that nothing had changed as a result of the death of Jesus. She was not looking for the risen Christ. She came to mourn his death and her preoccupation is with the body of the dead Jesus. When she discovers that the stone has been moved from the tomb, she does not even take the time to look inside, she immediately jumps to the conclusion that someone has taken the body. What other possibility might there be?

Charles Cousar describes her thoughts in such a way that they could be applied to anyone of us: "In a world of cause and effect, of established rules as to what can happen and how, in a closed structure that allows only for the old and familiar to recur, Mary's logic is right on target." To her way of thinking, nothing has changed. Jesus has died, and all that is left for her is to "find the body, wherever it has been taken, and get on with grieving." Her anxiety and grief are natural; they are what we would probably experience in the same situation.

It was quite a scene of confusion that morning at the tomb of Jesus. Mary running away to get Peter. Peter and the other disciple dashing back to the tomb. The other disciple, out of breath, looking in the tomb but not entering. Peter entering and finding nothing but two piles of clothes. Mary standing off to the side, crying. You can imagine that there was much shouting back and forth, about what was found or not found, perhaps some accusations and threats against whoever took the body. And in all of the confused examination of the evidence, they found nothing but emptiness and absence. Even though John says that one of them saw and believed, it is not clear what he believed.

For all of them, it seemed as though nothing had changed with the death of Jesus. Christ was not revealed by what they saw there; neither the garments in the tomb, nor the empty tomb itself.

As Barbara Brown Taylor describes it, "Anyway you look at it, that is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted almost 2,000 years now, and yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on that empty tomb, on that morning, on what did nor did not happen there and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too." "Resurrection," she says, "does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps . . . to remember that no one saw it happen on [that first] Easter morning either."

But *something* did happen.

Mary remained at the empty tomb, and when the gardener came along she questioned him, still hoping to recover the body of the dead Jesus. Christ was still not revealed in what she saw or didn't see. But when this gardener speaks her name, when she hears the familiar voice of Jesus, suddenly *everything* is changed. Easter begins in that moment when the living Christ calls her name, and she knows who he is. In that one moment of recognition, everything is changed.

There is a novel by Helen DeWitt called *The Last Samurai* in which a young boy goes in search of his father, whom he has never met, a father who does not even know of his son's existence. When he finally tracks the father down, when he finally works up the courage and finds a plausible excuse to visit him at his home, he hesitates to reveal his identity as the man's son. And as he is standing there contemplating what it will be like to make this awesome revelation, he thinks to himself, "in ten seconds there would not be an object in the room that was not there now, and yet everything would be different." He realizes that nothing *visible* will

change—he will still be the 10-year old child prodigy he is, his father will still be the second-rate travel writer he has always been, cars will come and go in the street outside, the world will revolve around the sun as it always has. And yet, everything will be different. Because of this moment of recognition, both of them will begin to see the world in a completely new and different way.

The miracle of Easter is not in the discovery of the empty tomb; it is not in what is seen or not seen. The Easter miracle is not even what went on inside the tomb. Whatever happened there was strictly between Jesus and God. The miracle of Easter is in Mary's recognition of the living Christ. Charles Cousar, again, says, "Mary's closed world (or ours) is broken open when Jesus calls her name. Something illogical, impossible, and unnatural takes place. The One who was certified as dead greets Mary. The established rules as to what can happen and how are overthrown. The old plausibility structure is left in shambles. It is a new day." Everything is changed.

So, what about those headlines? What about the evidence in the world around us and in our own lives?

Well, it is true. There was violence and cruelty and disappointment and broken relationships 2,000 years ago just as there is today. In that sense nothing visible has changed. This is still a world of abuse and greed and apathy.

But it doesn't *have* to be that way. Things do not have to be the way they always have been. There is *another* way—a way that does not accept death and hatred and alienation as the final answer; a way that protests in active ways against the many deaths that we inflict on each other every day. With the resurrection of Christ, we are shown that there is another way—a way that seeks out life where we would only expect the dead end of an empty tomb. Even with all the evidence to the contrary, there are no barriers, no obstacles that God cannot overcome in bringing this broken world to reconciliation with God's original intention of blessing and community.

Why is it, then, like the disciples who see and even believe, why is it that we do not understand and accept this Easter miracle? Why do we continue to live as though nothing had changed, as though the headlines and the disappointments and the failures had the final word?

Jonathan Kozol has written several books about the people of the South Bronx, one of the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods in our country. In one of those books, called *Ordinary Resurrections*, he recalls a conversation he had with a woman who wanted her daughter to go to Brown University but found obstacles that seem to be insurmountable. It is not that her daughter is not qualified. It is that no one sees the possibilities, no one expects that a Black woman from the South Bronx would even know about Brown University. Her daughter is told, both overtly and in more subtle, hidden ways, the same thing that she was told when she expressed a desire to her high school counselor that she wanted to go to college. She says, "I got this message very clearly. What you have to understand is that they didn't even talk to you about the kinds of courses you . . . would have taken [in college]. They didn't *plan* for you to go to college and they didn't lead you to expect that it was something *you* should plan on either. They led you to expect to clean the houses of the girls who went to college."

I wonder if the same thing could be said about the way we view those in our own communities who have not had some of the advantages and privileges that most of us have had. I wonder if we can see beyond the way things are and always have been, see beyond the dead ends of low-paying jobs and lack of education to the possibilities of a full life with dignity and happiness. The same thing could be asked about our own lives. Can we see beyond the

disappointments and the hurts. Do we live as though the pain and the failures had the last word, until we enter a kind of living death? Do we live as though nothing had changed? For all the celebration and noise we make on this day, I wonder if we don't come to Easter looking only for the empty tomb, and wondering where they took the lifeless body of Christ.

When Jesus called Mary's name in the garden, when he broke the bread with those gathered at Emmaus—the stories say that they *recognized* him. Not as a supernatural ghost come back from the dead, but as the living Christ who brings life and hope and possibility where none existed before.

The headlines indicate that nothing has changed since that first Easter encounter, that the new normal is not that much different from the old normal. And maybe they are right. Maybe in a sense nothing has changed. But the good news of this Easter Sunday is that it doesn't have to be that way; that in the resurrection, Jesus has opened up another way.

But the way begins in each one of us. The change in the world that God desires, the change in the world that resurrection makes possible won't come unless and until there is change in each one of us. When we stop looking to some distant past for the lifeless body of Jesus in an empty tomb; when we instead encounter the living Christ going before us in the world today; when we refuse to accept things as they are and always have been; when we refuse to perpetuate the limits and obstacles that we have placed on others and on ourselves; when we refuse to accept racism and gun violence and poverty as normal; when we hear Christ speak our names; when we begin not only to think and believe, but to act and live as though anything is possible because everything has changed—then we will become what the church is called to be: the living body of the risen Christ.

Then our Easter celebrations will not be just empty noise, but genuine expressions of the new life that comes whenever and wherever we encounter the living Christ. Then when we join in the ancient Easter proclamation, "Christ is risen!" we can add: and so are we all!

May it be so.