

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. CHRIS MOORE, ASSOCIATE MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Chris Moore

Easter Sunday – April 4th, 2010
John 20:1-18

The Empty Tomb

We have all been complaining about the weather – yearning for the arrival of spring. Well, I believe that it has blown in like a hurricane...the seasonal shift has happened. There is a great thing about seasons, both the seasons of nature and the seasons that the church celebrates. They offer some order to life, but without – at least here in Oklahoma – a great deal of predictability. This year Easter has come early and spring has come late...it's just part of the flow.

There are some certain seasonal constants, even with spring – the birds chirping, the reawakening of trees and plants and flowers, the end to hibernation by some of my neighbors...they start appearing in their yards...their long absence ended by yards to mow, gardens to tend and bikes to ride. The windows open up, the back door stays open to accommodate the increased traffic inside and out and the comforter gets rolled down to the end of the bed, only to be pulled up on the chilliest of spring nights.

The redbud tree in our front yard has slept in late this year. It is usually in full bloom by Alec's birthday, mid-March, but this year it is just starting to show its telltale buds...the deep purple-red that will soon have it looking like a royal vestment thrown over the dark winter branches. It won't be long before we're looking at all of the redbuds blooming out all over – it won't smell good, but the reds and violets and pinks and whites will dot our natural canvas like a four-color Jackson Pollock exhibit and we will know that spring is here.

This is the seasonal flow and there is something in this natural flow of things that is amazing to me. First of all, it happens without fail...spring always comes. And second of all, it happens without my intervention at all – in fact, it is quite indifferent to my desires and plans. Without me lifting a single finger this artwork comes, without me doing anything plants bloom and grass grows and the world comes alive again. Even that crepe myrtle that stood in my front flower bed blooms through its craggy roots, despite my attempts to get rid of it. I trim it back and cut out the roots and think that it is gone, but it springs alive again, reaching small-leafed shoots towards the sky...mocking me with its disregard for my landscaping strategy. Nature, it is said, abhors a vacuum, and fills it with life.

Life is, after all, what Easter is all about, right? Well, a particular kind of life – what we call resurrection. We move through Holy Week from life to death to resurrection and we acknowledge and celebrate that day when the perceptions of the disciples changed and their lives were never the same. When we hear or read these stories of the resurrection – from whatever Gospel you read them – they are parabolic expressions of the early life of our faith community. Often these stories are portrayed as “eyewitness accounts” which I think makes the whole reading of them frustrating and, once you engage in even the slightest bit of study, really problematic.

Sometimes there is one angel at the tomb, sometimes two...In Mark Jesus doesn't appear at all at the tomb (in fact never is witnessed only promised) and yet in John there he is talking with Mary. Who is at the tomb changes, where they encounter the risen Christ changes and yet we are to call this an eyewitness account? There are some basics that stay consistent throughout the accounts – the tomb is empty, the body is gone and Jesus either implicitly or explicitly appears to his followers in a form that is in some ways physical and in others not.

But I don't think the point of these stories is to present facts or to recount history. These are parabolic tales...I don't think that if you could get in a time machine and head back with a video camera that you would capture some or even any of these details. But that doesn't mean that they aren't real. As my Hebrew Bible professor used to say, “The Bible is full of stories that are completely true, and some of them actually happened”. Parabolic truth is not dependent on factual truth. As Marcus Borg points out, no one asks about the veracity of the prodigal son or the accuracy of the Good Samaritan, they are parables and understood to be passing on a different kind of truth. Yes, there

were fathers who owned land and had no-good sons, and there were Samaritans as well as robbers and priests who ignored the pain of others – so parts of parables are true in a journalistic sense. But parabolic truth uses those elements to arrive at something deeper and more profound.

Ultimately I'm not sure that I care if you think that the tomb was empty or not, if you think that the body was stolen or taken away by the disciples themselves. I don't think that it matters to me if you see the resurrection as physical or metaphorical or the appearances of Jesus as something that could be videotaped or a metaphysical experience – I want to know what the stories *mean* to you. That's what I think is important and why the parabolic effect is what really matters.

It is a way for me to address Easter beyond the rational – beyond what I may know about it. It is a way for Easter to have a profound impact on me without having to wrestle with believing in a physical resurrection, which I don't, or how Jesus' death pays some ransom for our sin, which I think is an early church way of understanding the trauma around Jesus' execution...and one that may not work well for us anymore. But none of this theological wondering does away with the power and impact of Easter for me...and this is largely because, as Robin has said many times, knowledge by itself isn't cathartic or redemptive.

The last few mornings I have stood on my deck in the backyard, the coolness of the morning still a welcome friend for a while longer, and sipped my coffee as a woodpecker rattled away off in the distance and the soft glow of the sunrise peeked over the trees and I was just silent. I do have to contend with a puppy who thinks that every waking moment is an opportunity for me to play with her, but I still manage to find some peace. I love those mornings. And at some point in the early spring, in the face of all of this new life I find myself being filled with reverence. It isn't a time for understanding; it is a time for being. Despite my knowledge about photosynthesis and cell reproduction, regardless of my understanding of science and the mechanisms of life – from how seeds germinate to how babies are made – I'm still pretty amazed by the sprouting of a plant and absolutely floored by the birth of a baby...and that is the redemptive part, not the knowing. There are many times I find God simply asking me to be alive to the moment...without the need to explain it or rationalize it into submission.

I think that this is some of what these three visitors to Jesus' tomb must have felt like. The train of explanation begins to roll very quickly – notice that Mary

Magdalene only need see the stone rolled away to run to the disciples and report that Jesus' body has been moved. She doesn't look, she just goes with a cursory glance over the scene and develops a story. When Simon Peter and this mysterious "other disciple" run toward the tomb, in a race that some scholars think is John's attempt to reconcile these two apostolic communities – the John followers and the Peter followers, they make their own more complete discovery. There is no body. There are wrappings, but no body. The "other disciple" sees and believes – the Greek word that means more like "he became committed to a cause, or he had trust in something". But neither, the text tells us, understands...they return home, which seems a strange response to the disappearance of Jesus' body. These two disciples have knowledge, they see the empty tomb, but they are still not substantially changed. Even though one of them has become more committed, they still do not "see".

As we have seen with the gospel attributed to John, it is the women who get the message. It is Mary who has the encounter with the risen Christ and Mary who eventually recognizes him and calls out to him. Again because we read only the translation and not the Greek we don't know that there are different words for "seeing" that are used here. One means to physically see something, one means to know or to perceive something. When Mary reports back to the disciples she tells them that she has *perceived* the Lord.

I can see the plants blooming and the sun shining...I can see the birds flying through the air and this robin who keeps flying into our picture window over and over again in some sort of masochistic ritual...I can see the abundance of people at the parks and the cars being washed and the general increase of activity that comes with spring. But I also *perceive* spring, in a way that goes beyond what I can explain. Spring is as much a feeling as something that can be witnessed. It is something that you just have to allow to be – after all, we don't make spring...it just happens. And frankly that's what I long for in the hard, lingering days of winter...I long for that feeling...that *perception* of spring.

That's a nicely humbling experience, at least for me. In so many places in my life I have to make things happen – the dishes don't wash themselves (or the clothes for that matter), the kids certainly don't raise themselves, the work of this church community doesn't just happen - it has to be done. So it is nice to be reminded from time to time that I am not the center of action in the world, though it may feel like it. I do my part, but there is a whole operation going on that I do not control or even participate in. That is humbling to know – and humbling in a way that brings me not to shame but to reverence. One of my

favorite authors, Barbara Brown Taylor, says in her magnificent book An Altar in the World, that “the exercise of reverence generally includes knowing your rank in the overall scheme of things”. Reverence reminds us that we are all caught up in the same game here – none of us are clean or righteous and that being caught in that “great web of mutuality” makes us more complete, more whole – even in our brokenness.

But let’s face it, reverence can be hard. We do not live in a world that prizes or facilitates reverence. We live in a face-paced, get-it-all-now, win-at-all-costs environment. We participate in that irreverent lifestyle, even if it is not by choice. Facing our place of complicity in even the things we profess to hate can be difficult. Facing our participation in the very systems we think are useless or broken, or worse yet evil, is shocking. Sometimes it is easier not to know. It is easier to grill steaks if you’ve never been to a slaughterhouse...it is easier to buy your clothing when you don’t know about the sweatshop it was made in...it is easier to hate someone you don’t know. This is why it is important to make a sacrament of our food, our clothing and our interactions with one another – because they matter. It is why we need to spend at least part of one early morning in the spring in our yard just perceiving spring.

Taylor also says this: “As painful as reverence can sometimes be, it can also heal. I know for a fact that it is possible to survive great grief by hauling a mattress outside on a clear night and lying flat on your back under the belly of the sky. Holding a baby also works, or a stunned hummingbird if you are lucky enough to find one.” A great portion of reverence is simply paying attention. I think that Easter is a celebration of reverence...and of paying attention.

When I think about the resurrection appearances, I think that they were probably due to the disciples paying attention in ways they had not before. In almost every case, Jesus is with the disciples for a period of time before they “recognize” him...before they realize who he is, or perceive his presence. This is a kind of reverence. They recognize Jesus by finally understanding what he was trying to tell them and that his mission was not tied to his physical body, it was something much larger.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was murdered on the balcony of a Memphis hotel 42 years ago today, once said that “If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.” I think that he had Jesus in mind when he said this. Because the real pull of Easter for me, regardless of what you think about the details, is that we not just remember Jesus’ death but

his life and what it stood for. We must remember that it was his life that stood against the power of exploitation, oppression, injustice and hatred and that he was killed because of that social sin, rather than as a price for ours. His resurrection is in our perception – our understanding – of his life and mission and witness to the Kingdom of God. That is how God has redeemed him.

Oscar Romero was a voice in El Salvador for the oppressed and voiceless. He was not raised as a revolutionary, but in the arms of the church as a privileged and proud priest. But a series of events caused him to see the message of Jesus and the world around him very differently. His relationships and the cruel trauma of everyday life for the people whom he served as bishop caused him to *perceive* reality in a different way. He set aside his political ambitions and his connections that only served the status quo and began to speak truth to power and be a voice for the powerless in El Salvador. His efforts and work inspired and helped thousands. Archbishop Romero was assassinated after giving communion on March 24th, 1980 at a small hospital chapel, just a day after giving a speech directly to a group of Salvadoran soldiers, urging them to obey God's higher calling over the government's unjust orders.

If you ask me, that was the story of Jesus played out again. Romero, commenting on the parable of the wheat, said in his homily just minutes before his death, "Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ, will live like the grains of wheat that dies. It only apparently dies. If it were not to die, it would remain a solitary grain. The harvest comes because of the grain that dies. We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses; that God wants; that God demands of us".

The disciples went on to live their lives dedicated to what Jesus had taught them. Marcus Borg thinks that the most miraculous thing about Easter is that they did this – when Rome had clearly won, Jesus was dead after all, the community that followed Jesus continued on feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, opening the door wider and setting the table for one more person – always expanding the circle despite what the empire said.

In 2005, 25 years after his assassination, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was remembered in a mass in San Salvador. Over 20,000 people attended. When the papal nuncio, the Pope's ambassador, announced the mass to be in memory of Archbishop Oscar *Reynaldo* Romero, the crowd gasped. Then, slowly a chant of "Arnulfo! Arnulfo!" rose from the gathered mass, followed by a cry of

“Queremos un Obispo que anda con los pobres!” which means, “We want a bishop who will walk with the people!” After the mass, the crowd marched to the plaza in downtown San Salvador shouting, “Se siente, se siente, Romero esta presente!” We feel it, we feel it, Romero is present!

There was no rational data given, no evidence of a body or carefully constructed theology...there was only perception. Romero was among them just as he had been. His words and life had incarnated the gospel of Jesus Christ and now he was incarnated again in them. Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez said at that same mass celebrating Romero that “Jesus is the homily of God, and Romero is the homily of Jesus in our presence.” We, my friends, are called to be the homily, the words and deeds of God, in this world. We are Easter people, called to look differently, to see something new, to perceive Christ in our midst.

This, after all, is what the empty tomb is all about. God isn't asking us to believe in the re-animation of dead tissue or the suspension of natural law...God is asking us to simple reverence, humble awareness and sacrificial service. God is compelling us to see beyond win-at-all-costs, past what's in it for me, and towards love your neighbor as yourself. God is calling us to feel our way into the vacuum left by hatred, vengeance and continued oppression. That's the message of Easter – for like nature, God hates a vacuum too...and She fills it with Love.

AMEN

Copyright 2010 Chris Moore