

The Promise of the Cross (Easter Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

John 20:1-18

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 God. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending 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.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Promise of the Cross

He is risen! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia! He is risen! But what does that mean? Easter is a tricky holiday, religiously speaking. Christmas is easier. We understand birth—births we celebrate. But death, resurrection? Those are harder.

I suspect that most of us, actually, have an easier time with the resurrection part of Easter than with the death that leads to it. Regardless of whether or not you believe in a bodily resurrection, most of us are reasonably comfortable with the idea of resurrection—the idea that life can emerge out of death. It’s something we have all experienced in one form or another. If nothing else, those of us who suffer through (or delight in, if you’re one of those people) Wisconsin winters experience the resurrection of the natural world each spring when our brown and barren lawns once again turn green, when seeds long dormant begin to push up through the soil, when plants that have looked dead for six months suddenly begin to green and grow once more. The natural world is ripe with examples of resurrection—from controlled burns that allow new growth to emerge to the daily rising and setting of the sun. Author Margaret Renkl, in her most recent book, *the Comfort of Crows*, describes it as “life in death in life ... commonplace resurrections.”¹

We can *see* resurrection happen in the natural world around us, but we also *know* what resurrection feels like. Rare is the person who can make it through this life without experiencing the death and darkness that comes with grief, depression, or despair—the visceral realization that life as we know it has ended—the fear, or certainty, that all has been lost. But, we know, too, what it is to live *through* those seasons, to emerge months or years later, amazed to find that life continues to call to us.

Resurrection we can understand. Resurrection we can celebrate. What makes Easter challenging *isn't* the *empty* cross, the *empty* cross is great good news. What makes Easter challenging is the existence of the cross at all. It is the struggle to reconcile the God we meet in scripture, the God we have encountered Sunday after Sunday this Lent in the Old Testament stories of covenant—a God who hangs up their archer’s bow in the story of Noah and promises never again to respond to human evil with divine violence, a God who cares so deeply for the individuals and communities God partners with that God is willing to overlook, forgive, and work with all of the blunders that they make (and they make a lot)—the challenge of Easter is the question of how to reconcile this loving, forgiving God who desires that all of creation have life and have it abundantly, with a God who would, at best, *allow* their child to suffer and, die on the cross, and at worst, *send* them to die. Before we can fully celebrate God raising Jesus from death, we have to wrestle with the question of why Jesus had to die in the first place. The challenge of Easter is the question of why—why did Jesus have to suffer and die?

There are, of course, *lots* of ways to answer that question. And in the 2,000+ years since Jesus was crucified, the church has embraced and endorsed a number of them, not all of which

¹ Margaret Renkl, *The Comfort of Crows*, p. 53

are compatible with one another, which makes sense since the Bible itself offers us multiple metaphors and ways to understand the cross.

You are likely familiar with many of the more popular answers: ‘Christ *had* to die in order to pay the price for our sins,’ or ‘Jesus’ death broke the hold of sin and death upon us,’ or even ‘it is through Christ’s death that we are reconciled to God.’ These are the answers we see most often on billboards or reflected in the lyrics of traditional hymns and popular praise songs. But there are other answers as well: ‘Jesus’ death on the cross shows us what true love, obedience, or faithfulness looks like,’ ‘Christ crucified reveals the depth of God’s love for us,’ ‘the cross exposes the violence of the world,’ or even ‘it inaugurates God’s kingdom on earth.’ We could go on, but you get the idea.

What all of these answers have in common is that they emerged because they give voice to things we know to be true about ourselves or God. We know that God’s love for us is fathomless, we know God is just, and we know ourselves to be incapable of living the way we know we should (consider how hard it is to shop ethically these days for just one example).

The *trouble* with all of them, with *any* answer we might come up with, is that they are human—they are our best guesses. It’s not that any of these answers are wrong per se (though some of them are particularly problematic), but when taken to their logical conclusions, they fail to describe the God we meet in other places in the Bible, the God we know through the life and teachings of Jesus. Because the God we encounter again and again in scripture is not a God who would send anyone, let alone their own child, to die. The God we have met in each of our stories of covenant, and the God that Jesus described, is a God who desires life—a God who covenants with us, partners with us, makes promises to us, so that we might *live* abundantly; and so that through us, all of creation might thrive.

So what then can we say about the cross? One option, of course, is to say nothing at all, to acknowledge that we do not know why and likely never will. As one writer put it, “the great mystery at the heart of Christianity is the mystery of the Easter. The mystery of resurrection ... the mystery of the death that led to the resurrection, and the mystery of the life that led to the death Not the kind of mystery you solve, like an equation, but rather the kind of mystery you explore.”² And there is a place for mystery, to be certain. But there *are* things we *can* say with confidence about the cross because we know God is One. We know that whatever we say about the God of the cross must also be true of the God we know in Scripture, through Jesus, and in our lives.

So we can say that God did not *send* Jesus to die on the cross. The God we encounter in the Bible, the God we know through Jesus’s life and teachings, isn’t a God who sanctions violence, let alone requires it. Is it possible that God *knew* Jesus would end up on the cross? Yes. But *knowing* that would be the likely outcome of Jesus life, and *sending* him for that express

² Matthew Myer Bolton, “Understanding Easter: The Beginning,” Strange New World podcast

purpose are two very different things. Instead of saying that God sent Jesus to die for us, what if we viewed Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as yet one more attempt on God's part to Covenant with us, to promise us and partner with us. What if Jesus came not to die, but to help us know God—to help us see the ways in which we have misunderstood God and misinterpreted God's actions?

One of the things we know to be true, both in scripture and in our own lives, is that we interpret God's actions through particular lenses. Who we know God to be, how we experience God acting in our lives says as much about who we are and what we believe as it does about God. We saw this in our scripture readings this Lent. In the story of Numbers, the people believed God had sent poisonous serpents to punish them for their complaints, but the text subverted that interpretation and offered up another one as God transformed the serpent into something that could bring about new life. We saw it again in the prophecy from Jeremiah about a new covenant, one that would not require temple sacrifices or intermediaries to go between ourselves and God. We hear it when God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, "What should I think about all your sacrifices? ... I'm fed up with burned offerings ... I don't want blood ... When you come to appear before me, who asked this from you, this trampling of my temple's courts? Stop bringing worthless offerings. ... [Instead,] Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1). And we see it again when Jesus overthrows the money changers' tables in the Temple—this insistence that we are missing the point, that we are misinterpreting God's actions and desires.

God didn't send Jesus to die. God sent Jesus to help us remember, or to help us know for the first time, that God is a God of love; a God whose deepest desire is for us, *all* of us and all of creation, to flourish. It's just that that kind of love, that kind of inclusiveness, that vision of justice, it can get you killed.

Jesus didn't die to forgive our sins, God was forgiving us long before Jesus went to the cross. Jesus died because he lived a life counter to how the world wants us to live—a life that spoke truth to power, that stood up for those who were the least and the lost; a life that inspired other people to question the institutions and systems that were in charge; a life that advocated for the flourishing of all creation. And you can't live that kind of life, especially in Jesus' day, and not get crucified.

The power of the cross isn't that it accomplished anything, it's that God endured it—that God knows what it is to suffer and die. The power of the cross is that Jesus saw it coming and loved us enough to continue his ministry to the end. The power of the cross is the life that led to it.

The promise of the cross is that it stands empty.

The promise of the cross is the discovery of Easter morning; it is when Mary and the disciples come to the tomb and discover that the body is gone, when Mary encounters Jesus in the garden, when the disciples meet him in a locked room. The promise of the cross is that the cross is not the end. The promise of the cross is that even death cannot stop the power of God's love. The promise of the cross is that goodness is stronger than evil and love is stronger than hate. The promise of the cross is that light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death.

The promise of the cross is the same promise we hear over and over again in the stories of the Old and New Testament. It is the promise that *continues* to be written and told in the stories of our lives today. It is the promise that the cross, even the empty one, isn't the end. The story of God, the story of life, continues to be written in each our lives, if only we have the eyes to see it. Amen.