

“Finding Words for Resurrection” by Marjory Bankson

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Easter Sunday

How many of you have had a spiritual experience? [most people raised their hands]

How many of you never told anyone about it? [a few raised their hands]

The story that we just heard – of women who discovered an empty tomb, remembered Jesus saying that he would “rise again” and then had their story disbelieved – is a story of finding words to describe resurrection, which is what we celebrate on this Easter Sunday.

The text

As dawn broke on the first day of the week, some women disciples who had traveled with Jesus scrambled up the stony path toward the cave where his body had been secured. Moving quickly and silently to avoid attention, they carried spices to anoint his battered body.

These women were Galileans, not city-women from Jerusalem. According to Luke, they had all been healed from “demonic possession.” More likely, they had fled abusive situations. Whatever had happened, they were different now, changed and freed from bondage to their social systems. They had been welcomed by Jesus. Some had money and position. Luke says they supported his ministry “with their means.” (Luke 8:1-3). Now they were doing what the male disciples did not dare to do – go to the tomb, avoid Roman soldiers, and perform the rituals that their Jewish faith required. They would wash his body and anoint it with oil and spices before rewrapping it with linen cloths.

But when they arrived, they found that the boulder used to seal the cave had been rolled away. Confronted in the dim light by the black mouth of the tomb, the body was gone. Had robbers stolen it? Had other believers gotten there first? Had the Romans taken it? Stunned and fearful, they crowded close together, drawing on their common strength.

Suddenly, two men “in dazzling clothes” appeared. In biblical stories, dazzling light means only one thing: they were God’s messengers. Then they hear these iconic words: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you what would happen?”

Ahhhh, yes. Now they remember. In three days, he would rise again – whatever that still might mean. With some sense that Jesus could be present in a new way, they ran to tell the others about the empty tomb. That Jesus was alive! That he had

not left them alone! That all was NOT lost!

Although Luke does NOT include an encounter with the risen Christ, something clearly happened! The women went from being secretive spice-bearers to outright apostles, sent by their divine encounter to tell the story of new life, new hope, and changed lives! The word "apostle" means "one who is sent," and these women surely were sent to tell the good news. They were the first apostles!

Now, wouldn't you think that the disciples would greet these women with open arms? Believe their story? Or at least remember what Jesus had said with new understanding because the women themselves were transformed?

But no, Luke tells us that the disciples, locked in an upper room somewhere, considered their experience "an idle tale." A fabrication. Something the women had made up – as though these faithful supporters of their ministry had risked their lives for a lie.

Then, almost as a footnote, we read that Peter (at least) was curious enough to check it out. And when he found the tomb empty, though presumably without the dazzling messengers, he was "amazed" because he saw the linen cloths by themselves, maybe folded neatly in a separate pile.

In this Resurrection story, there was no encounter with the risen Christ. Just an empty tomb, angelic heralds, and a disappointing trip to share the good news with other followers of Jesus. It was hardly worth celebrating the way many people celebrate Easter today. This was not a triumph. It was barely believable, according to Luke. The women probably felt like a failure. And yet... and yet... Peter was curious enough to go see for himself, so their story was not a complete failure.

And I suspect we have more in common with these Galilean women and their frightening experience than we do with the hoopla of grandiose images of dead people rising from their graves at

the end of time. We may sing hymns of triumph over death, but I believe Luke's story actually gives us a way to experience death and discover new life in the midst of it.

Noticings

These Galilean women experienced something profound and moving. The empty tomb by itself created fear, but the messengers inspired possibility – hope that something else was possible – that death was not the end of the story. Their decision to go to the tomb was not some heroic call. The women were just doing the next right thing. Together, they trusted their physical experience of loss and went with spices because that was their custom. They were simply doing what needed to be done, even though the men were too frightened to go with them.

The angels reminded them of Jesus' words, saying he would "rise again." What that meant was not clear. All four Gospel writers describe women as the first witnesses, and each one has a different version of the story. None suggest that God demanded Jesus' death as payment for our sins. All suggest that the spirit of Jesus, experienced as the "risen Christ," was shared freely among the disciples, men and women, to empower them for ministry. That tells me how important it is to study the actual stories of Jesus, and through him, get to know the nature of God as a loving creator, not a harsh and demanding judge.

Finding Words

Language for spiritual experience is remarkably sparse in our culture too. Rev. Bobby McKay, a UCC pastor in Glenview, Illinois, reports that most of the people she interviewed had had experiences of spiritual healing which they had NEVER shared with anyone. Robert Wuthnow, a well-known pollster, has reported similar results. Either the respondents didn't have language for those experiences, or they didn't have people who

could receive those stories with reverence or respect. We need places to practice telling and hearing stories of spiritual encounter, so they aren't trivialized or exploited for profit.

Last Friday, I had my own empty tomb experience at Dayspring Retreat, which Peter was leading. The air that day was heavy and still. I sat for a time under a dazzling pink cherry tree in full bloom, expecting a message, but nothing came. Then walked down to Merton's Pond, hoping to find frogs mating, but there was no movement, not even a dragon fly. As I circled the field, the woods were silent, except for a single bird-call. When I got to Jenny's Tree, I sat and stared at the glassy lake, listening to the lone goose standing on a rock below. Where were the mating pairs of geese? Where were my dazzling messengers?

As I came to the equipment barn, the rain began, sprinkling at first. I stood under a pine tree, snapped my vest and wiped my glasses, calculating how long it would take me to walk back to the Lodge. The rain was coming harder by then and there was no way to stay dry, so I simply walked as fast as I could.

When I got to the porch, it was full of people wrapped in shawls, like monks at prayer. I went inside, took off my soaked shoes, and built a quick fire with the dry wood left there. Then I sank into a stupor of gratitude, for all those who had made Dayspring possible. Finally, the fire began to speak.

It was an old story made new: "Some are called to tend the fire here, and make sure there is dry wood for a rainy day. Others will be called to come by, be warmed, and move on. Fear not, for I am with you." And for me, it was a resurrection word.

Closer to home, we have experienced the same dearth of language in our School for Christian Growth. In the "12 Steps for Everyone" class, class-members have struggled to speak

about the experience of “turning our life and will over to the care of God as we understood Him.” What that means, and how to do it isn’t simple, yet this in a church where most people write spiritual reports every week, but we are finding that we do not have ready language for those spiritual experiences. I’m grateful for the class and the questions that draw us out.

We cannot bear witness to God’s presence in our lives if we do not have language for what we know. We need places to practice, to fumble with descriptions, to name the numinous nearby. We need community to hold up the hope of Resurrection when, as an individual, we cannot find the language of hope. I’m not speaking here of wishful thinking, but of courage and change and leadership that comes with language for human experience. Christ is risen in us, in community, in our classes and rituals of worship.

Communion is another way of saying “Christ is risen” in our midst. Today, when we break the bread, we are remembering the death of Jesus’ body, and the deaths that we experience in this body of Christ also, because death and endings are a natural part of God’s good creation.

When we drink the cup of grape-juice [hold up cup], we are affirming the mystical presence of Christ, poured out like wine as a promise of presence, of hope and new life. Jesus was known in the breaking of bread; Christ is known in the drinking of wine. Together we celebrate the mystery of divine presence here and now.

The group of women who came to the tomb on Easter morning remind us that the body of Christ is a communal body, held together in time and space by our very human bonds of love and forgiveness, of care and courage. With joy then, let us affirm the mystery of Easter morning with the ancient chant of Resurrection:

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Allelujah!

Amen.