

Marjory Zoet Bankson: While It Was Still Dark ...

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

While It Was Still Dark ...

Text: John 20:1-18

...Do not hold onto 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.'

In the Gospel lesson for today, Mary came to the tomb "while it was still dark," numb with grief. All that she loved and hoped for was gone, swallowed in the ugly shame of public crucifixion. She did not know that her world was about to be turned upside down.

When I read this story, I wonder...

- Why did she go there alone?
- Why does John portray the first resurrection appearance like this when the other Gospel writers tell of a group of women who came with spices to anoint the body?
- What does this account tell us about resurrection for the early church?
- And what is resurrection for us—now?

Gardener

Then someone she supposed was the gardener came. Interesting,

that she knew it was not a Roman soldier. Something in his manner told her she could speak with this man, and cry out her loss and pain. Think about the image...

- A gardener tends the land, cultivates creation.
- Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pour out his fears and beg for “the cup”
- to pass him by...but it did not. A Garden holds death...and life.
- A garden is not a wilderness. It reclaims the promise of Eden.
- A garden speaks of stewardship, of land and growing things.

“Mary,” he said, and something in the sound of her name revealed who it was. What was dark and somewhat protected suddenly became familiar as well.

“Rabboni!” she cried. “Teacher!” Her world flipped over in an instant. Her life with Jesus was not over after all.

Moreover, this part of the story interests me the most.

Jesus said, “Don’t hold onto me.” I imagine that Mary reached out for him, eager to embrace the man she called “teacher,” but Jesus stopped her –“Don’t hold onto me...but go and tell the disciples what you have seen.”

- That is, declare yourself a witness. Be “good news” to them.
- Jesus cut her loose from the dependent teacher/student relationship and called her to claim the power and authority of her own voice.
- The call to “go and tell” gave new purpose and direction to her life.

Mary experienced the Resurrection in her own body, in her own life, by responding to the call of Jesus. We can too!

Our Body

Today I suspect some of us are coming to this Easter morning a bit like Mary, downcast and discouraged. We are tired of waiting for a new home, weary with the effort of acting as a community. We were hoping to have a final foot washing service here at 2025 and then carry the cross up 16th street and across on Allison to our new location on [Carroll Street](#) for Easter morning. How foolish that all seems now.

Now we know how long it takes to listen for inputs by everybody. Now we know the cost of being without a single strong leader who will step out in front and take us into a new land, whatever the cost. Now we know how divided and afraid we really are, like the disciples were.

Easter morning finds us here, with Mary, on our knees, in the darkness, wondering what has happened in the tomb.

[Last week](#), I spoke of the two strands in Christian thought and tradition. One is the apocalyptic strand and the other is the Jubilee strand.

The Apocalyptic tradition looks toward final judgment, so “right belief” and “right doctrine” are important...but what we do in the meantime is not so critical. Oh yes, personal charity and kindness are called for, but there is no need for systemic change. There is little call for justice making in the apocalyptic tradition. It is a warrior’s faith.

However, the Jubilee tradition is about behavior more than belief. It calls for consciousness and community. The Jubilee strand is a vision of restoration and renewal, of stewardship and co-creation with God. . It begins with rest on the Sabbath, seven-year cycles to restore balance for land and people. It calls for release of captives and forgiveness of debts in the 50th year. Jubilee is a cyclical vision – healing the hurts of the world – knowing it will hurt again. The

Jubilee tradition says there will be no final answers, no absolutes. It is a gardener's faith.

Jesus lived a Jubilee vision. He walked and talked with his disciples, teaching them by example more than words. Toward the end of his life, he called them to "Love one another as I have loved you." He expected them to change and grow. He taught them as a gardener does, with infinite patience and trust in the nourishing presence of God.

Jesus proclaimed the "Year of the Lord" as he began his ministry. It was a Jubilee claim—to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and release the captives. Then he called Mary Magdalene and his disciples to continue his Jubilee ministry when he was gone. That is what the church is for...to **change** the way things are done...to heal the sick, house the homeless and protect all beings at the edge of society...to be a witness for another way. When Jesus called Mary Magdalene by name in the garden, he was also calling us to a ministry of renewal and restoration in our day.

Yesterday, people from the sister communities of [Church of the Saviour](#) gathered at Dayspring to celebrate the life of Bud Wilkinson, the potter whose triple-cross logo marked the "sinner's medallion" which he wore and he gave away to many who visited his studio. For years, I thought the Potters House was named after Bud instead of coming from Jeremiah's scripture.

Bud was a big bear of a man, as brash and bold as Peter might have been among the disciples. Don Russell called him a "bum for Jesus," because he had been a hobo back in the Depression, hopping freights to work for cash. People sensed that he was unshockable and many came to him for counsel. I know Doug Dodge and David Lloyd would name Bud as a guide and mentor in their early days at Church of the Saviour. That Bud chose Jim Dickerson to do the service seems significant to me. They were two of a kind—renegades transformed by love, ready to reach

out at the margins of respectability.

Now Bud is dead, but his legacy of welcome is planted deep in the soil of Dayspring. Long before ecology was recognized as a justice issue, Bud had us hugging trees on silent retreat. He loved the land and knew the wildlife as part of our Sabbath stints out there. Each year, Bud offered an Easter vigil. He was fascinated by what happened in the tomb between crucifixion on Good Friday and Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Often nobody showed up, so Bud kept the vigil by himself...like Mary Magdalene in the garden. He too came "while it was still dark."

In Bud's final days, someone came and said, "I can see Jesus, standing there with open arms, just waiting for you Bud." In his inimitable way, Bud raised one eyelid and whispered, "I like it better here."

I am feeling a bit that way myself this week. On Maundy Thursday, I moved out of my office at [Faith@Work](#). Next Friday, I will hand over my responsibilities as president to a younger man, Doug Wysocky-Johnson. It marks the end of my call there. I only know this much—that I must make space for a new call to come. I will need your help to hold the space open instead of filling it with lots of "good things" offered by the culture. Like Mary, I have come to this garden "while it is still dark."

Conclusion

Last week, we experienced a powerful litany of how our thoughtless human behavior is killing off parts of God's good creation—a contemporary crucifixion that is going on all around us.

This week, we celebrate Resurrection, the other side of the story. Both are symbolic. Moreover, both are real. It is all too easy to spiritualize our faith, keep it separate from the

day-to-day decisions that determine how we will spend our time and energy. We need each other to remember who we are meant to be!

A Jubilee faith is both fragile and tough. Until our generation, God was a gardener we could depend on. The Earth sustained a Jubilee vision with the coming of spring, even when humans damaged parts of it beyond repair. Now we cannot count on that any more. Now we live in a time when humans have developed the power to crucify whole species, including our own.

Jenneke Barton [preached here a month ago](#), offering a wonderful list of small and large things we could do to nourish the Jubilee vision here. Elisabeth Dearborn will be offering a 2-week experience in the [School of Christian Living](#) in May called “the Council of All Beings,” as a way to nourish the soil and deepen the roots of Jesus’ Jubilee vision in this community. We hope you will plan to come.

Today we also have an opportunity to nourish the seeds of hope and resurrection in El Salvador, where an earthquake has dealt a devastating blow to the fragile democracy that was developing there after the civil war. The Easter offering will go to Dr. Vicky Guzman at ASAPROSAR in Santa Anna, where she holds up a vision of healthcare, basic education and sustainable land use for the people there. Our mission trip there planted seeds of hope in two of our own young people, Erica Lloyd and April Sizemore-Barber. It fertilized hope in some of the adults who went as well – myself included.

I want to add that I think it’s time for someone – perhaps the new mission group forming around our journey with children – to recognize how mission experiences tend the seeds of Jubilee. The rest of us need to remember that too.

Resurrection did indeed turn the ancient world upside down. It was a radical and bizarre message, carried by unlikely people

to a disbelieving world.

Resurrection is a cry of renewal, a call for justice and right relationships. We claim the Jubilee mantle of Jesus when we know, "Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!"

Amen.