

“Open my Eyes” by Marjory Bankson

Easter

March 31, 2103



When I was a girl, growing up in Bellingham, Washington, the Cascade Mountains were usually shrouded in clouds. But sometimes, on clear days like this one, my dad would cry out from the kitchen, “Look! The mountain is out!” And so it was – clear blue flanks and a dazzling peak, giving off a faint plume of steam to remind us of the caldron at its core. Mt. Baker is a 10,000 foot peak, rising from sea level, not 50 miles from where we lived. We knew it was there, but most of the time, we couldn’t see it. I think resurrection is like that: close by, constant, and rarely seen.

In our text for today, a small group of women come to the tomb where Jesus’ body lay after the horrors of his crucifixion. Luke actually names them in this account: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the “other women who told this to the apostles.”



This is not the first time that Luke mentions this particular group of women. They appear earlier in Luke’s account, in chapter 8. Mary Magdalene had been healed of seven demons and Joanna is identified as the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward. These women, Luke says, provide for the disciples of Jesus out

of their means, or their wealth. Far from being outcasts, these women have some credibility and are taking some risks to identify publically with Jesus. According to Luke, they traveled with Jesus and were part of his family of faith.

So here they are again, at early dawn, coming to the tomb with spices to care for his body. It was a natural, normal thing to do for their beloved teacher, even though he had been crucified as a common criminal. They find the heavy stone rolled away and when they went into the cave, Jesus' body was not there. Instead, they encountered "two men in dazzling clothes," who challenge them to remember the puzzling sayings of Jesus about rising again.

We remember that it was Luke who told the story of Jesus' birth, complete with dazzling angels and frightened shepherds. Now there are angels in the empty tomb, reminding the frightened women that Jesus had told them that he would be crucified, but would rise again on the third day.

In the gospel of Luke, angels signal a divine breakthrough – a kairos moment – a direct revelation. The question is, what did it mean to them? And what does it mean for us, today?

Like the women at the empty tomb, we catch a glimpse of something more, something glad and hopeful beyond our fear of death. The clouds part for a moment, or a day, or a lifetime, and we see with Easter eyes. Has that ever happened for you?

I felt that way on Thursday evening, when about 20 of us gathered here in this room for the Maundy Thursday service. We were remembering the night that Jesus shared a last supper with his disciples, and then he took a basin and towel and washed the feet of his disciples. Like the apostle Peter, who said to Jesus "No. Never. I don't want you to wash my feet," I want to be part of the circle, but curl my feet under my chair and not open myself to the naked intimacy of having one of you wash my feet. I've prayed and journaled about my reluctance to

let someone remove my shoes and socks, and realize that I'm afraid that one of you will find my bare gnarled feet repulsive.

Maundy Thursday confronts my inner fear of being dependent or pitied, at the mercy of your love and tenderness. It's almost too much to bear, but I know that the footwashing service is one of those times when I will glimpse the dazzle of angels, right here in this room, and so I come with all my hesitations, year after year, to be healed of those demons. I know it's one of those times when the clouds will part, and I will see with new eyes.

I thought of that again this morning, when I read the long article in the Washington Post about David Hilfiker, and his long slide into Alzheimers. Instead of hiding that from his community, David has shared it in a sermon to 8th Day, a letter to the wider Church of the Saviour community, and his blog is called, "Watching the Lights Go Out." He is claiming the power of resurrection, here and now.

An Idle Tale?

Returning to the gospel reading for today, the women did remember Jesus' words about rising again in three days, so they ran to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard in the empty tomb. We don't know exactly what they reported – that the body was missing? That they had seen angels? That they now understood that mysterious teaching of Jesus? But, Luke says, the disciples considered it an "idle tale."

If Jesus was truly human, and he showed us what it means to live in constant intimacy with God, then the disciples understood his untimely death as a tragedy. It was clear that the disciples didn't really understand how to love one another as Jesus had loved them. And their fearful doubts suggest that they had much to learn about the freedom that comes with trusting God's ongoing revelation, beyond the singular life of

Jesus.

Scoffing at the women, the male disciples had their own version of what had happened, and they were not open to a different understanding. After all, they were practical men. They knew the finality of death. They were not dreamers or mystics. Furthermore, fear had locked them in to their own story. Now that Jesus was dead, what should they do? Better not to get caught up in some fanciful wish-dream.

Unfortunately, many churches get caught in this trap – of needing to protect their own version of God's truth, God's way with us. Some doctrines, like the "virgin birth" or "salvation" or "atonement," seem like that to me. They are closed stories, designed to certify belief.

But what we see in this Easter story is that Divine Love has a playful aspect, using the marginal members of the group to bring a new glimpse of God into a closed structure – even if the disciples were deaf to the message at first.

Fortunately, Peter (the disciple) was curious enough to check it out. Even if he didn't believe the women, he was curious or suspicious enough to want to see with his own eyes, so he went to the tomb on his own. Although Peter didn't see any angels there, he saw the linen cloths by themselves. If someone had stolen the body, they would surely have taken it away all wrapped up. These scattered cloths told him that something miraculous had happened to Jesus' body – and he went home, amazed.

That threshold of amazement was a bridge of possibility that Peter could be open to God in a new way. It made him ready to become part of the body of Christ. Although he didn't go back to the disciples and confirm what the women had said, he at least had checked it out himself and got to a point of openness.

The empty tomb was a sign of something more, something half-

forgotten and half-remembered, something both familiar and strange. It pointed to the Realm of God, close at hand, just as Jesus promised.

Natural and Unnatural

Many Americans simply celebrate Easter as the coming of Spring, glad for new life after the barren months of winter. That makes some sense, since Easter is the only church festival set by the moon – on the first Sunday, after the first full moon, following the Spring Equinox. It is a celebration of the natural world – of swelling buds and greening grass, of cherry blossoms and periwinkles peeping through the snow.

But for spiritual seekers, Easter marks the liminal space between the death of Jesus and the life of Christ that quickens every spiritual community. There was one Jesus, but many forms of Christ.

If we can suspend our disbelief, and walk with Mary Magdalene and Joanna into the empty tomb, we may also be able to experience the unfolding revelation of Christ at the core of our community. It's not so much about Jesus as the risen Christ, but about the dawning realization among the disciples that they were to be the living body of Christ. We might see the empty tomb in Luke's account as the womb which later gives birth to the church.

That's the revolutionary understanding that began to dawn on me as I let my early interest in Church of the Saviour deepen into a commitment to this particular body of Christ, known as Seekers. Although I admired the leadership of Gordon and Mary Cosby, and the missional commitment of early members like Fred Taylor and Sonya Dyer, I sometimes caught glimpses of how my own commitment was beginning to bear fruit. The key seemed to be my own level of commitment, not theirs. It was my willingness to suspend disbelief and enter into the empty

space where my sorrows had been walled up that began to open my eyes to a spiritual dimension intertwined with the natural world that I could, in fact, experience directly.

Others do show us the way ahead. Just over a week ago, Gordon Cosby died peacefully in their apartment at Christ House, in his own bed, holding hands with Mary, his wife of more than 70 years. In the last few months of his life, he spoke more and more of resting in Divine Love, of discovering how vast and limitless God's love really is. Instead of raging against death, he let himself be enveloped by love. Killian Noe, the founder of Samaritan Inns, wrote for the special edition of Callings that I published just after his death. She wrote:

I've lived in Seattle for the past fifteen years. In the fall of 2012, I received word that Gordon was dying. At 95 he had had many ups and downs, but this seemed to be different. So I made immediate plans to go to DC. When I arrived at Christ House where Gordon and Mary lived, Gordon inquired, "How is it you managed to come at this time?"

"I heard you were dying," I admitted. "I heard that rumor, too," Gordon quipped.

In that visit, Gordon shared, "God asked me to raise money for a credit union for the poor of Adams Morgan. I told God, 'I am an old man who can barely stand up.' And God said, 'You still have influence. Use your influence for the poor.'"

"Gordon," I observed, "you talk about your conversations with God in a different way than before. You used to say, 'I try to act on the best, hazy, inner guidance I can get. Are you hearing God's calling with a different clarity," I asked, "and if so, what accounts for that new clarity."

Gordon responded, "Now that my body is failing and all I can do all day long is 'wait on God,' the guidance is getting a

lot more clear and specific."

"Makes me think we should be less about action and more about waiting," I concluded.

"Of course," Gordon reminded, "it's always a balance between waiting to be infused by Divine Love and acting on the guidance given."

Four months after that visit, Gordon and I were talking on the phone. "Gordon," I said, "at this point all of your days are spent mostly 'waiting on God.' What do you know more deeply than you have ever known it before?"

Gordon responded in a weak voice but with palpable excitement, "The immense vastness of the eternal realm of Divine Love. The whole world is a mere seed in the vastness of this Love. I was ignorant before to how vast this realm is. It is more vast than I ever imagined."

As Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, said on that evening when many of us gathered at the Potter's House, "Gordon taught us how to live and he taught us how to die."

As we come to the communion table on this Easter morning, we celebrate the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and Gordon Cosby, and others who have shown us the way, as the presence of Christ that binds us together.

And we ask, once again, that the clouds continue to part, showing us the truth of resurrection, close by, constant, and rarely seen.

Amen.