

Practicing Resurrection by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Text: Luke 24:1-12:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body...but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ...it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in... then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Let me begin with the ancient greeting on this Easter morning:

Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed!

Allelujah!

When we answer, "He is risen indeed," we bear witness to the mystery at the heart of Christianity. We stand at the threshold between the physical life of Jesus, and the mysterious presence of Christ that binds people together beyond family and clan. As a symbol of resurrection, I have placed unfired burial urns and painted prayer shawls on each windowsill as tangible evidence that even the ashes they would hold are gone. Death brings us to that liminal place, between death of the body and mysterious life of the spirit. To conduct a burial service, one would normally wear a stole or prayer shawl to signify that we are close to the veil of mystery between now and forever. [Put on prayer shawl]

How to Describe Resurrection

In our reading from Luke, we see the women who were closest to Jesus coming as the sky begins to lighten...the stone has been moved away...the burial container split open. Then the men, dismissive, disbelieving...and Peter willing to check it out. It is almost a stereotypical story of gender roles, except that Peter believed the women enough to go to the empty tomb himself. Maybe he was the first Seeker, questioning the story, running to see for himself, amazed at what had happened-even though we do not know exactly what that was.

If we look at the earlier Gospel of Mark, the women came to the tomb, encountered an angel and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. Moreover, if we look at the very first account of the resurrection, in the letters of Paul, there is no empty tomb account at all, even though Paul understands Jesus to be very much alive and present in a life-changing way. That is the experience I want to explore this morning.

In the epistle appointed for today, Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." In other words, faith is not only about getting through this life; it is about something that transcends death, something that lifts the human spirit beyond the threat of death, or disfigurement, or disrespect.

Left Behind

Jesus' death on a cross was about as ugly and dehumanizing as it could have been. In fact, the Romans reserved death on a cross for political prisoners because it was so horrible. So when the women came to the tomb with oil and spices, they were prepared to see their beloved teacher horribly mangled. What a

relief it must have been to find his body gone, not to have to touch his rotting flesh.

The women came because they wanted to touch his body with reverence, with love – to sanctify what had been desecrated – to minister with their hands. Luke describes the women coming before dawn with their balm and spices. Mary Magdalene was there – she who had been healed of seven demons by Jesus – no doubt with his touch as well as his embrace of who she was. Joanna, wife of Chuza, a steward in the household of Herod Antipas, was also there. Luke tells us that she was one of the women who, along with Mary Magdalene, had helped to support Jesus financially. Mary, the mother of James, is also named, along with other women who accompanied the disciples during Jesus' ministry. They came like the woman with the alabaster jar, to anoint Jesus for burial.

What they found instead was an empty tomb and no guidance about what to do next. Luke tells us there were two men in dazzling clothes there in the tomb. The earlier Gospel of Mark has only one angel there. In addition, Paul, the earliest witness to the resurrection, includes neither angels nor tomb.

I want to suggest that the miracle of Easter morning was not what happened to Jesus. It is what happened to the women and men who were left behind. They were the ones transformed. They are the ones who felt empowered, who told the story repeatedly, making it more physical each time.

April

Last Sunday, we celebrated the 24th birthday of April Sizemore-Barber and heard from her in Circle Time about her extended stay in South Africa. She had been invited to speak at the 10th anniversary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because of her honors thesis on the use of theater in the reconciliation movement. After her parents returned here, April stayed; she was determined to experience the new

South Africa on her own. She worked with Khulumani, a grass-roots advocacy organization, and she wrote a play that wove actual testimonies into a theater performance.

"I saw how their faith in God and their singing together keeps them going," April said. Then she described she was moved to see her play performed for an audience of people who had been victimized during the Apartheid Era. She thought her play validated the strength and hope that it took for these victims to speak out, rather than letting their pain remain unspoken, forgotten.

That, for me, is an experience of resurrection. People who have been tortured, humiliated, and discarded by the political system, finding their voice again. Moreover, April, a young, white woman in a black township, discovers the power of love from a grandmotherly black woman after April was robbed at gunpoint. As April spoke, I remembered her first trip to a developing country – when she went with Seekers to El Salvador 11 years ago. After her experience in Soweto, April said, "Now I know that I need a spiritual community too. I can't just do it alone."

Resurrection Experienced

Throughout Lent, we have been sitting in a twilight space. The windows were curtained; the cross was draped in black. It felt like a cave to me or an empty tomb. Our liturgy spoke of retreat from the glare of too much light – the glare of commercialism – evil planned in broad daylight. It made me squirm at the truth of how our culture boasts of material success, and despises those who are meek or poor.

Today we have come to celebrate a different kind of light. We celebrate the light of Christ. We celebrate the mystery of love that is not the fierce biological imperative between parent and child, but something more wondrous, harder to name. I felt it here on Maundy Thursday, when 30 of us gathered to

wash each other's feet. How humbling it was to have another touch my recently bruised feet. How sacred to stroke the feet of another, to let love flow through our hands, our touch. That deeply human connection goes beyond words, moving slowly in the silence from hand to foot to heart. Was Maundy Thursday an experience of resurrection in Seekers?

We live in a culture that tells us to fear touch. We read every day about touch gone badly with abuse and exploitation. We are trained to live on alert, to be wary and suspicious. Nevertheless, our faith invites us beyond our fears, toward compassion, kindness, trust and healing touch. Last week, I was struck by the many images of hands in Deborah's Stations of the Cross which were spread around this room, some finished and others not. In every icon, there were hands – poised, pointing, touching, holding-which carried much of the symbolism of Jesus' journey to the cross. This morning, I want to offer a different image. Unfired burial urns made by hand, designed to disintegrate in water. Like our bodies, these vessels are not meant to be permanent. Like the empty tomb, they are meant to hold ashes temporarily ...and then dissolve. The prayer shawls give those who are left behind something tangible to hold, to caress and enjoy, to set apart ordinary time and space for sacred use. They too are hand-made.

When I first came to Seekers, we did not celebrate Maundy Thursday with foot washing. It grew out of an amazing experience with the L'Arche Community in the early Eighties. Elizabeth O'Connor called me one day to see if the clowns at Seekers could do something for the new L'Arche community in Washington that would not be as wordy as a traditional service. We decided on a hand-washing service, in which a bowl could be passed from person to person. There were probably 40 people in the sanctuary, and everyone washed their hands in that bowl.

When it came at last to the final person, I could see that the man was badly crippled and his hands were curled permanently.

I could also see that he was trying to get to his feet, to carry the bowl to the altar. So, even though I was in whiteface and therefore in silence, I whispered, "Can you walk that far?" He nodded, so I stood and watched, tears streaming down my face. Then I helped him back to his seat while the tissue box made the rounds and the clear plastic bowl of dirty water rocked gently beneath the cross.

Call to Resurrection

We all come with dirty hands and dirty feet. Jesus was not embarrassed to kneel and wash his disciple's feet. Nor was he ashamed to have the woman with an alabaster jar wash his feet. Those are the stories we need at times when we do not know what to do, how to act. Like the women in today's Gospel, we sometimes come with a plan-and find the place empty. Like the men, we sometimes dismiss someone else's story as idle talk. The story as Luke tells it has an archetypal sense about it. The women come as a group, moved by their feelings, bringing spices for anointing the body. The men appear logical, rational, suspicious. The women encounter an angel, who asks them why they sought the living among the dead. The men dismiss their tale. It seems quintessentially masculine and feminine, two poles pulling in different directions.

In Luke's version, Peter's willingness to pay attention to the women's story is a breakthrough, but it is hardly a satisfactory completion. There is no dialectic resolution. Instead, it is an invitation to wonder what happened next-and to find ourselves in the unfinished story. It is an invitation to recognize that we each have these energies at play-the logical, rational, verbal critical thinker; and the tender feelings that have no words. A healthy community will have both, carried by both men and women at different times, in different ways, challenging us toward wholeness even as we hear the call to become the body of Christ in this time, this place, with these unlikely people.

Easter brings us to the threshold between the physical reality of Jesus, lived by one man in a certain time and place, and the mysterious presence of Christ as it manifests between us, moves us beyond our separateness, fills us with anxiety and promise. Here we listen for Jesus to call us, name us in the body of Christ, just as he called Paul and Mary Magdalene and Peter and Joanna.

Howard Thurman, the great African-American writer, pastor and mystic, has said of Christ's call:

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

What are the signs of that aliveness? As I was making these urns and prayer shawls, Peter caught me humming with happiness, glad to be about the work of my hands. I have noticed that I do not hum at the keyboard of my computer. I probably need both in my life-the experience of making art by hand, and writing words to share with others. Feeling and thinking, intuition and logic, aloneness and community. Every day we have a chance to practice resurrection-to step beyond the unconscious confines of fear and hatred-to risk the reality of Christ among us in this body, in this community.

Amen.