

“Unimaginable” by David Lloyd

April 16, 2017



Easter Sunday

Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed.) Hallelujah!

After 2,000 years when we say “Christ is risen indeed” we may feel one or more of a range of emotions. We may feel joy so profound that it can bring us close to crying. We may have a feeling of absolute certainty that gives us hope and confidence for the present and the future. But some of us might feel uncertainty or even heaviness as we say it. Some of us might even say it with reluctance – while feeling that we shouldn’t feel reluctant. A few of us may even say it with disbelief, mentally rolling our eyes and crossing our fingers. Our range of emotions about the resurrection of Jesus reflects how challenging that resurrection is for us modern, rational, post-Enlightenment, educated folk.

The four gospels are silent about what the disciples did

during that Sabbath following Jesus' crucifixion and then on that Saturday night. We can't know what they thought about the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. I suspect the disciples probably didn't do much or talk much. The shock had been too great. They were too depressed and ashamed. What had happened had been unimaginable.

Their three years with Jesus had been the best years of their lives. They had seen miracles. They had reveled in large crowds. They themselves had been able to preach and heal the sick. They had been so sure that he was coming into the kingdom! They had always thought that they would stand up for him, would sit at his right hand when he ruled the country. One week ago when they had come into Jerusalem there had been adoring crowds. Each day at the Temple the crowds had thronged about them. It was Passover, the time to commemorate the Hebrew people's liberation from slavery in Egypt. With their help, Jesus was going to usher in a new Passover, this time from Roman oppression. They had been so sure that Jesus was the messiah.

And just like that, in the time it takes for a kiss, it had all fallen apart. Right up to the time the soldiers arrested Jesus the disciples kept expecting to see him call down some angels and strike the soldiers dead. But no, the soldiers were alive and it was Jesus who was dead. Jesus hadn't become the messiah. Jesus had been a good man, a great man, the power of God had been in him, he had worked miracles. But he hadn't been the messiah. There would be no new Passover. Rome was still over them, taxing them, Roman soldiers abusing them. Nothing had changed. Nothing would change. What did they feel? – sadness, anger, a great emptiness. It must have felt as if they had wasted the last three years.

And even worse than their disappointment in Jesus, was their disappointment in themselves. They had acted shamefully. They had all run away. It was no consolation that none of them could have done anything, that there had been too many

guards. They had seen Jesus model how to be fearless and strong, yet they had been fearful and weak. Peter, Jesus' rock, the one who insisted Jesus could rely on him, had three times denied even knowing Jesus. The disciples hadn't stayed to claim Jesus' body. They would have had no idea what had happened to it if it hadn't been for Mary of Magdala and some of the other women who'd seen Joseph of Arimathea claim it and bury Jesus' body in an unused family tomb.

The disciples' shame was unbearable. I suspect that they wanted to get away from the places where they would be reminded of their deepest shame. It was best to go back to Galilee, to resume the lives they had once known, to go fishing again. Some may have been so despondent that they considered suicide. Only one week ago such feelings would have been unimaginable. How could they forgive themselves? Who was there to forgive them?

In the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*, Alexander Hamilton brings disaster upon his family. He has an affair, and the woman's husband extorts money from Hamilton in exchange for his silence. Then when the receipts of his hush money are used to accuse Hamilton of embezzling Treasury funds, Hamilton publically admits to the affair and the extortion. As a result, his Presidential aspirations are crushed and his wife justifiably rejects him. As he tries to defend Alexander's honor, their son Philip is challenged to a duel. Alexander coaches his son in how to satisfy honor and survive, but in the duel Philip is killed. Alexander and his wife are torn apart with grief. Alexander's sister-in-law Angelica sings:

There are moments that the words don't reach

There is suffering too terrible to name

You hold your child as tight as you can

Then push away the unimaginable

The moments when you're in so deep

Feels easier to just swim down

And so they move uptown

And learn to live with the unimaginable [\[i\]](#)

We all live with the unimaginable. Some of us still bear personal suffering or scars from suffering too terrible to name. In the TV news we see cities bombed, refugees dying, long term but undocumented immigrants deported, black men killed or beaten while surrendering to police, wives killed or beaten by their husbands, women and girls sexually assaulted, children killed by their parents, leaders shamelessly pandering to the obscenely wealthy, politicians trumpeting falsehoods as truth or "alternative facts," our freedoms yielded in the pursuit of the fool's gold of "security." Our world is Good Friday seven days a week. We live with the unimaginable.

After the silence of the gospels about that Holy Saturday, they suddenly tell of what happened on Easter morning. In all four of them, women were the first to act and were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection.

In John's gospel, in the early dawn Mary went in grief to the tomb where Jesus had been interred. She probably stumbled at times, hardly able to see for crying. To her shock and dismay the huge stone that both sealed the tomb from predators and kept the stench of decay within had been rolled away. Mary ran to Peter and Jesus' favorite disciple and then somehow was able to cry out that Jesus' body had been taken away to an unknown location. All three ran to the tomb where the disciple Jesus loved confirmed what Mary had seen: not only was the tomb empty but the wrappings had been left behind. Peter dared to go into the tomb, and the disciple Jesus loved joined him inside it. Neither understood that Jesus had been resurrected. The two men went left and went home. Like the

other disciples they couldn't face up to Jesus' arrest, his death, and their shameful behavior. They could not stay to face the mystery of an empty tomb.

But Mary remained, weeping. Not crying, sniffing into a handkerchief, but sobbing out in pain, rocking back in forth with cries so raw and loud they would have brought a gardener running. Her grief had been bad enough when she had seen Jesus' terrible death by crucifixion. But now his body was gone so she could not even touch that. What was left? Nothing. Her heart was broken – but Mary remained at the tomb.

In the March 29 issue of *The Christian Century* Ayanna Johnson Watkins shared her grief at having had two miscarriages in six months. She wrote:

“I'd never experienced loss like this before, and I didn't know how to grieve. I wanted healing, less for my body than for my broken heart and busted-up faith, because I was tired of feeling like a shell of myself...I literally felt like I was left at the site of an empty tomb, an empty womb. I didn't think I could bear to stay there.”[\[iii\]](#)

Rev. Watkins described how on a Sunday after she had helped lead worship the pastor invited those who desired healing to join him in prayer at the altar and her body willed her forward. As she knelt and the pastor began to pray she heard a cry. She wrote:

It was a sound like I had never heard. A deep, guttural cry, a groan of deep pain. It sounded both nearby and far off, and I wondered where it was coming from. Then I realized it was coming from me...It sounded horrible, but it felt amazing – like the first real thing I'd done in months...I felt somehow quiet, like I had finally expressed something true to God.

Mary chose to stay at the scene of her second grief. Somehow she dared to look into that tomb and found it wasn't empty at

all – there were two strangers who then asked her why she was crying. Mary sobbed out the causes of her pain again. She couldn't bear to look inside any more, and as she turned she saw the gardener, who asked her why she was weeping. Once again she had to speak her griefs, name her pains, and this time she heard her name, "Mary." She knew that voice and it broke through her grief, her broken heart. Rev. Watkins says, "...God calls her by name, revealing that the one she thought she had lost was right in front of her. She brings her tears to the tomb and leaves celebrating new life." Mary was taken from deepest grief to unfathomable joy by one word! Unimaginable. For us, like Mary, resurrection is God with us in all our suffering, bringing us into a new life.

Understandably, Mary couldn't keep her experience to herself. In John's gospel she went to tell the disciples. "I have seen the Lord!" And what was their reaction? Were they still too overcome by grief and shame to grasp the good news? We don't know.

But that same evening Jesus appeared to the disciples in their locked room as they hid from the Temple authorities. What was their reaction at the sight of Jesus? Was this a ghost come to haunt them? What did it want? Was it an angel coming to exact vengeance for their cowardice? For their disavowal? For their reaction – or lack of reaction – to Mary's news? We don't know.

Jesus' first words to them were reassuring: "Peace be with you." Jesus made sure that they knew it was him. He showed them his wounds from his crucifixion. Once they recognized him, they were filled with joy. Once again, he said, "Peace be with you," adding, "As God sent me, so I send you." Then Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive someone's sins, they are forgiven; if you say they are unforgiven, so they remain." And then Jesus departed from among them. Somehow, Jesus had forgiven them before they even had a chance to say, to show, how remorseful they were. They

had a fresh start! Unimaginable.

Back to *Hamilton*. Later in that same song, Angelica sings

There are moments that the words don't reach

There's a grace too powerful to name

We push away what we can never understand

We push away the unimaginable

Alexander stands by his wife's side. As she finally chooses to take his hand the company sings:

Forgiveness, can you imagine?

Forgiveness, can you imagine?

(If you see him in the street, walking by her side

Talking by her side, have pity)

Look around, look around

They are going through the unimaginable

In the resurrection of Jesus, God is with us in our grief and suffering as with Mary, grace too powerful to name, grace that she couldn't push away, grace that we can't push away, the grace of presence. In the resurrection of Jesus God forgives us as Jesus forgave his faithless disciples, grace too powerful to name, grace that they couldn't push away, grace that we can't push away, the grace of forgiveness. Those early Christians' lives changed. Most died martyrs' deaths, faithful to their call as they had earlier been faithless. And the world changed.

Easter is God demonstrating that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, who is our Lord. Unimaginable.

Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed.) Hallelujah!

[\[i\]](#) “It’s Quiet Uptown,” *Hamilton*, ©2015 Lin-Manuel Miranda.

[\[ii\]](#) Ayanna Johnson Watkins, “Living the Word: April 16, Resurrection of the Lord, John 20:1-18.” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 134, No. 7, March 29, 2017, p.20.