

“Witness to Hope” by Marjory Bankson



Icon of the Resurrection by the hand of Thomas Xenakis

April 12, 2020

Easter Sunday

How do we make sense of resurrection in this time of viral pandemic? How are we witnesses to hope in this season of covid-19? And what, exactly, are we hoping for?

I've been appalled at congregations that continue to worship together because they believe Jesus will protect them from getting the virus. That seems like a foolish wish-dream, magical thinking. **And** I've been inspired by the pictures of ordinary citizens in Wisconsin, who knew they were braving infection in order to vote – bearing witness as they stood for

hours, wearing their facemasks as a sign of hope.

Peter and I know that we belong to the most vulnerable age-bracket, and so we wash our hands and wear bandana face-masks when we go out – to protect others, in case we are carriers. I have been going to the grocery store once a week at 6:30am for perishables, and we're updating our wills and end-of-life directives. All of that seems realistic and doable, faithful and hopeful too.

My response has been shaped by two epidemics in the past. One was the polio epidemic in 1952. There were over 15,000 new cases that year, and our county was hit especially hard. Results were deadly or crippling, and there was not yet a vaccine, although we knew one was being tested. My dad was a doctor in Bellingham, Washington, and two of his patients, wives of other doctors, died within weeks of each other. To protect himself and others, Dad always wore a fresh lab coat at the office, and another one to make rounds at the hospital. He sent his work clothes to the cleaners, and was meticulous about hand-washing. In 1954, when the Salk vaccine was ready for testing on human beings, my dad spearheaded the effort to make Whatcom County a test site. All first-graders were vaccinated, results were carefully monitored, and people slowly began to mingle again.

My second experience was even more personal. My mother had tuberculosis, and she spent part of my sophomore year in high school in a TB sanitarium. Drugs to isolate the TB bacillus were just being developed then, and because my dad was able to supervise her treatment, she was allowed to come home while on an experimental drug. We simply kept her dishes and clothing separate from the family wash. We couldn't hug her, but we could sit close by and talk – We kept social distancing at home. She gradually improved, I still test positive for TB, and she lived to the ripe old age of 91.

During that time, beginning while my mother was in the

sanitarium, I began taking pipe organ lessons from the organist at our church. He was also on the university faculty there in Bellingham. We never heated the church during the week, so my dad arranged for me to practice the organ at a local mortuary. Every morning before going to high school, I worked on Bach preludes and fugues in the presence of various embalmed corpses. They looked like plastic mannikins, not real people. It made me wonder about **our aliveness – where it comes from, and where it goes**. The threat of my mother's TB made my questions more urgent and I began to wonder why we are here, what my life work might be. **My teenage questions opened me to the world of wonder and hope that we celebrate today, to the possibility of life beyond what we can count and measure, to the mystery of resurrection and living with spiritual awareness**. In that spirit, let us turn to the story in the Gospel of John.

John 20: 1-18

Under the cover of darkness, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. Armed with oil and spices, she could only hope for some miracle to roll away the heavy stone that sealed the cave where Jesus' tortured body lay. Her grief overcame any caution she might have felt, but she expected the worst.

At the tomb, she found the stone had been moved. That was the first sign. Mary turned and ran, back to where the disciples were sheltered. She told Peter and another disciple, presumably John, that somebody had taken Jesus' body away.

They raced to the tomb and found it empty, just as she said. There's an odd detail here, about the linen cloth which was wrapped around his head, had been rolled up by itself. But there are no angels, no messengers, no dazzling light. Disappointed, the two men head back to their hiding place. They even miss the sign of the empty tomb.

But Mary stays, weeping. Then she looks into the tomb and two

angels are there, dressed in white. They ask an obvious question: "Why are you weeping?" This is not a subtle drama. The angel spotlight is on. We know a miracle is about to happen.

Then Jesus appears, but she doesn't recognize him. She's still in the dark, but the dawn is beginning to break.

"Mary," he says. And then she does know it's Jesus. "Don't hold onto me," he says, as though she could hold him back. "I have not yet ascended to my Father."

There he is, broken and whole, physical and spiritual, miracle and mundane, opening her eyes to God's presence here and now – and she wants to hold onto it! Like Peter at the Transfiguration, or Saul on the road to Damascus, Mary stands in a Kairos moment, changed forever. It is her resurrection too.

In the Resurrection class, a dozen Seekers have been meeting like this, on Zoom, to explore the New Testament scriptures about resurrection **in chronological order**. That means we started with the seven authentic letters of Paul. Because Paul never met Jesus in person, this spiritual form of Jesus was all he knew – and we could see from his letters that Paul had an ongoing relationship with the power and presence of the post-Easter Jesus, whom he knows as "the Christ" or Christ Jesus. For Paul, the gathered church community is the body of Christ, but the aliveness of that body, the soul of that body, is Jesus in a spirit-form.

Next in the written record comes the Gospel of Mark. It's a bare-bones, one-year account of Jesus' ministry, written maybe 40 years after the crucifixion as the Temple in Jerusalem is being demolished by Roman soldiers, but the presence of the risen Christ threads through the whole story. It's not an eye-witness account of Jesus' life. It's a recollection of stories and teachings and miracles from the perspective of a

transformed community, followers of “the Way.”

In Mark’s gospel, several women, including Mary Magdalene, go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. They too find the stone rolled away. They encounter a “young man” in a white robe, who tells them Jesus is “not here – he has been raised.” Then he directs them to tell the disciples that the risen Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee.” Then Mark’s story of the empty tomb ends abruptly: the women were terrified, and they said nothing to anyone. The empty tomb is Mark’s witness to the resurrection.

This week in the class, we’ve been looking at resurrection stories in Matthew, which is an expansion of Mark’s account, written 10-15 years after Mark. In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” go together. An earthquake rolls away the stone. An angel arrives and the guards are so dazzled that they faint. “Fear not,” the angel says. “I know you are looking for Jesus. He’s not here. He has been raised. Go and tell the disciples that he’s going to Galilee.”

But this time, Jesus appears to the women, right there, outside of the tomb. In Matthew’s account, they fall down and grab his feet, to make sure it’s him and maybe to hold him right there. Then he tells them the same thing: “Go and tell the disciples that I’ll meet them in Galilee.”

According to Marcus Borg, John’s account, which we read this morning, is the next to be written. You can see the progression. For Paul, Jesus is always the Christ, always a visceral spiritual presence. For Mark, attention to Jesus’ physical life and ministry means that he must account for the physical body – so the empty tomb becomes the symbol of resurrection. Nothing more is needed.

For Matthew, who expanded the ministry of Jesus in an effort to provide basic guidance for a new covenant with God that would include both Jews and Gentiles, the resurrected Jesus

takes on a more physical form, such that the women can actually touch his feet.

And finally, John's gospel presents an archetypal encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene that transcends time and space. In many ways, it mirrors Adam and Eve in the garden, and symbolically heals the rift between God and humankind. The risen Christ himself becomes the promise, the covenant, the hope that human beings can have the same kind of relationship with the Holy One that Jesus had while he was alive. In that way, Jesus transcends death and we can too.

In none of the Gospels is resurrection a ticket to heaven. Nor is it a promise of long and happy life. That is not the hope of resurrection.

What is the hope then?

If we go back to the empty tomb, and recall the very first words of the angelic messengers, I think the hope is **"Be not afraid."**

I've been struck by how fearful some people are these days: Afraid to leave the house at all, and yet constantly tied to tv news, as if to stoke their fears; afraid to touch their groceries, as if soap and water were not enough precaution; angry at isolation, as though it was like unwarranted arrest and solitary confinement instead of a choice we have, and a way to love one another.

"Fear not," Jesus says to the women in Matthew's version, knowing that they are terrified. "Go and tell my brothers that I'll meet them in Galilee," and we remember that Galilee is where the whole story of discipleship began. It's an invitation **to begin again**, to bring their experience with Jesus to this new phase of their ministry and their call. It's not a ticket to heaven, except they can now taste that heavenly banquet when they gather with friends as we will, at the virtual communion table.

“Fear not,” Jesus says to the trembling grocery clerk, the overextended farmer, the frustrated delivery person and the exhausted nurse. And somehow they find the courage to go another day, another week, another month – and we find the courage to offer a ride, a meal, a call to someone who’s been overlooked or left out.

Closer to home, I can hear Jesus whisper “fear not” when Peter and I talk about what we would do if one of us get sick with the corona virus. At our age, I think we would choose not to call an ambulance when breathing gets difficult. At our age, I think we will explore the options for palliative care or for hospice at home, even knowing that the other might already be infected. “Fear not” also means being able to look with clear eyes at the possibility that our lives must change, that our planet cannot survive the way we have been using resources and eliminating habitats for other plants and animals that are part of the luminous web of life.

For me, “fear not” means paying attention to my call now, living as fully as I can, trusting the seeds of faith that were planted so long ago in a Bellingham mortuary. It means offering a class by using a medium that still seems like a foreign language to me. It means going back to Galilee, where I first learned to trust the invisible presence of Christ for a living faith – and sharing that experience with you even though the words will always be inadequate to carry the faith, hope, and love that makes this community a living, breathing body of Christ – where together we can affirm that the work of loving one another does indeed cast out fear.

May it be so. Amen.