

July 10, 2016
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And on the Third Day....

John 20:1-18
Second Presbyterian, Baltimore

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. ~ John 20:1-18

I am not a sailor by any stretch of the imagination, and I know very little about the art of sailing. But the one small thing I do know about it might be helpful to keep in mind as we approach our worship today with the tragic events of this past week on all of our minds.

I am thinking of tacking into the wind; the back and forth, zig-zaggy journey you have to make in a sailboat if you want to make forward progress on the water. You can't sail in a straight line. In order to get where you want to go, you have to be patient, you can't rush the process, and you need to use the tools available to you to get to your intended destination.

So it is that we continue our Summer Sermon Series this morning to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. This is what we do every Sunday morning when we gather; it is the core reason we are here in the first place. It is also the centerpiece of the Apostle's Creed, the high point of this, our statement of faith.

*A historical footnote here: (our first zig-zag), in ancient writings, very different from modern, the most important points were placed smack-dab in the middle, like a pyramid—low to high to low - for emphasis, or like an hour glass, filtering and focusing everything through the most important point of the work; which is all pretty much opposite of how we read and write and think about things nowadays. Now we start off big & bold, and end with a memorable flourish, after getting lost in the details in the middle somewhere.

So today we reach the high point, the hinge point, the pinnacle, the operative place of the Apostle's Creed.

On the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead. It is a statement to celebrate and a truth for us to be deeply joyful about.

It is so important that two other small details need to be mentioned about this clause in the creed before we get to the main point: about the third day; and about the word 'again.' (Two more zig-zags.)

When we say that Jesus rose –again- from the dead, we're not saying that he had already done it before, it is simply a word used for grammatical emphasis. Technically it is unnecessary, some versions of the creed simply omit it. It's OK if you don't say the word; it's like a small 'amen' inserted in the Creed, again, for emphasis. (Get it?) Again.

As for Jesus rising on the third day.... how did that go? He died Friday around 3 PM, was in the tomb, and beyond, all Saturday long, and then arose at sunrise Sunday... So, the ancients calculated days like Cruise-Line Companies, 'any part of a day thereof,' counted as a full day. As a matter of fact, that line of thinking even extended to the

counting of years. So when the Apostle Paul says that he was on a mission for 3 years, it could have been, say, just 14 months, a full year with one month on either end... That's just how they counted in those days; and we still repeat it, just so.

Now- with that being said, how do we begin to look at the Resurrection today? (Heading a little closer to our destination now.) As usual, I have a visual for us to serve as a guide, an Easter painting you are likely not familiar with; but one very important and helpful.

This is an award winning painting, from 1906, by Henry Ossawa Tanner, a significant American artist in his own right.

Born in 1856, in Pittsburgh PA, he was the first African-American student admitted to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He studied there with Thomas Eakins, one of America's leading painters in the late 19th century.

He moved to Paris in the 1880's, the art capital of the western world, and began to thrive as an artist, painting landscapes, portraits, and many Biblical scenes, including this



one.

I think that it's the unstated wonder about this painting that is so captivating... it's a scene of the resurrection we don't often consider.

We're looking at Peter and the beloved disciple (John), peering into the empty tomb. They had been told by Mary that the stone was somehow rolled away from the tomb (whether she herself had looked inside, we don't know.)

We're told that Peter went in, picked up the linen wrapping (called a Sudarium), and the other disciple then followed. They stared, pondering, aglow with the lingering light of the resurrection.

Then, in our scripture passage, an odd succession of words follow, with a lot more meaning than we usually pay attention to. They are seemingly contradictory, but are very real, human and revealing. 'He saw and believed, for as yet he did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.'

Now if there's ever a phrase that is appropriate for these days in which we live, here it is. "He saw and believed- for he did not yet understand." What does this mean? (Have you ever noticed this verse before?) Have **you** ever seen and believed, without understanding?

My take on this is that they both knew, deep in their bones, through the core of their being, that Jesus was raised, that death could not hold him, but they didn't know how it had happened, or even, really, why- or that scripture had already revealed that this was going to come to pass.

They knew it, they believed it, they trusted it. The good news was more real than anything else these two had ever experienced before. It changed everything for them; how they saw the world, how they lived their lives, what they wrote and said and did, forever after.

Just hours before they had been staring death in the face, literally, and had expected, after they awoke that morning, to be dutifully paying their respects to a dead hero, a martyr for a cause they had never fully understood. But here they stood, looking beyond their narrow world view- into the great beyond of love, hope, and a gift of new life beyond life on earth, that made this world we live in all the more precious, dear and meaningful.

And instead of seeing and believing, and then passively turning a blind eye to the needs around them, their eyes were opened anew to the love of God for, in and through them; that they themselves could be instruments of love, peace and reconciliation.

- This is how this portrait of the two disciples helps me to understand the meaning of the resurrection in my life (and this is where the tragic events of this past week come in, the horrific shootings in Baton Rouge, Minnesota, Dallas, and now the fatal stabbing of

Molly Macauley just block away from here.)

To get started, I need to go back to what I shared in the children's sermon, and how it is we can choose to view the world. For some 'focus' means looking at life through a soda straw; seeing just a narrow vision of the world. It is tunnel vision, situational blindness, you could say, with one's field of vision diminished to a pinhole view, living with blinders on- unwilling to look around to see what's happening around you.

The resurrection- looking into the empty tomb, like Peter & John, provides us a much bigger and deeper view; a 'spiritual telescope' as it were... beyond our immediate circumstances toward where God would have us go in light of the new life proclaimed in Jesus' rising. And it's not just how we see things that's the difference (although it is a necessary starting point), it's also how it affects our living that really matters too.

- When the two disciples peered into the empty tomb, they were left with unfathomable wonder and a power of belief they couldn't understand. They came away looking beyond themselves, through the disappointment, despair and death that they walked through to get there... toward a new and very real promise of hope which gave them the insight and energy needed to continue the work that Jesus began.

So, this brief clause, that 'Jesus rose again from the dead' is the conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry in the Creed, but it's just the beginning of how it was that the risen Jesus continued to meet his disciples and nurture them in their journey of discipleship for the next 40 days, before his ascension. (Next week's theme...)

Importantly for us, and interestingly, after the resurrection, Jesus performed no amazing feats (beyond being raised from the dead, that is), no magic, no miracles, no prestidigitation....but he continued a steady, faithful diet of a ministry of teaching, making scripture come real to them again, reinforcing what he taught and how he lived... welcoming the stranger, loving and accepting others, siding with the downtrodden, challenging those who limited love, loving others as he loved himself... Not so complicated at all, but not so easy to do, really.

Jesus appeared to his family, friends and many others- shared meals with them, continued his teachings, explained what had happened in his life, and why; he shared himself with them fully.

There is nothing dramatic recorded about these forty days, which is amazing-considering, but then again, may be its not so amazing.

In some ways it might seem anti-climactic (at least for a screenplay), but for real human life, this is really what being alive for others is really all about... the everyday, day to day, steady, calm – assuring presence of God is what we are really looking for, and what we really need, today, tomorrow and always.

In grief, in joy, in our normal living, not necessarily with a lot of drama, the reality of God's presence is with us... every morning, noon and night, to consistently share love, mercy and understanding, even-handed and generously, which in the end, keeps us all headed in the right direction.

That's why Jesus rose again, for us and for all who look to him for assurance, freedom (from fear) and peace.

May it be so, for us and for all of God's children, everywhere. Amen.

The second fear is in contrast to the first, which says, "It is not true." The second fear, equally terrifying in its own way, is the fear that it *is* true. What the women saw and said is true. Now if one is serious-minded, that, too, is a terrifying revelation. There used to be a television series called "The Twilight Zone." It came on every week and was a moderately horrible horror show. Once in that series, there was a story about a town in the old West into which one day a stranger rode. He was a snake oil salesman type, only in this horror story the salesman was selling something much more intriguing. For ten dollars he would raise someone from the dead. Of course, the stranger became the overnight talk of the town. Though many were skeptical, many others were curious enough to risk the money, a lot of money in those days, to have someone raised from the dead. Only then the story takes a curious twist.

As the story unfolds, people start coming to the stranger in secrecy at night, offering twenty dollars if he will *not* raise certain individuals from the dead. And, of course, it does not take much imagination to speculate why so many were willing to pay such hush money. The price has gone up, but the word is that people still pay hush money (sometimes even religious people pay hush money), and it doesn't take much imagination to figure out why. Consequently, even for the disciples as for you and me, it could come as a terrifying

revelation that the resurrection is true because, to be serious about it, if it is true the Misfit is right again: "If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow him—because Jesus has thrown everything off balance." Now for anyone serious minded, it is a terrifying thought that the resurrection is true.