

Wednesday of Easter Week  
April 7, 1999

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

*John 20:1-18 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's gospel gives us a resurrection quiet, ordinary, up close and personal. If we had chosen to read the alternative resurrection story appointed for this week—Matthew's version, we would have gotten special effects worthy of a Stephen Spielberg—a major earthquake, a bright shining angel descending from the heavens like lightning, guards at the tomb keeling over in a dead faint. In Luke's version we would have what are described as "two men in dazzling clothes," who terrify the women come to spice Jesus' body and then deliver a veritable theological discourse to them, which they take back to the skeptical and dismissive disciples. Mark, of course, has the women, told by a young

swain sitting in the otherwise empty tomb to go inform the disciples Jesus is up and gone, run off in terror and keep this apparition to themselves.

But John's story has a different tone. The camera cuts in close on Peter and the disciple whom Jesus was said to have loved and, especially, on Mary Magdalene. Mary arrives alone at the tomb, finds it empty, and runs back to inform Peter and "the other disciple." The two men run pell mell for the tomb, with the other disciple beating Peter to the door, peeking in, and yet holding back till Peter catches up and enters first to survey up close the linen wrappings and the head piece neatly folded and lying to the side. The other disciple, the one of whom Jesus was especially fond, joined Peter in the tomb, saw the empty wrappings, and found his hope and trust in his disappeared friend rekindled. But not actually understanding what for sure was going on, the two—John says—returned to their homes, apparently, it is implied,—like the women in Mark's resurrection story—saying nothin' to nobody.

But, just as Genesis 1 and 2 juxtapose two creation stories, here John inserts a second resurrection story. He returns us to the tomb, where Mary stands weeping. Now she alone looks into the tomb, she alone engages with two angels sitting, and she alone turns around to see someone she takes to be gardener, who addresses her by name and to whom she then responds not by falling on the ground and bursting out with "My Lord and My God!" No, this Mary, known by name to the gardener, responds affectionately, "Oh, my dear sweet rabbi," and throws her arms around him. I would love to have witnessed this scene. Jesus has to plead with her to let him go. "Don't cling to me," he tells her. I have to go, and you have a job to do. And he sends her on a mission (the first apostle, isn't she?), a mission to his brothers to let them know he is on his way to be with God—as he puts it, "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"—Notice how he places himself on an equal footing with them. And she does go, completes her mission, and dispatches her message as she was commissioned to do.

So the two stories are parallel, with the first focusing on the two men and the second, the climactic one, focusing on this touching, intimate encounter between Jesus and Mary in the garden. In the second creation story of Genesis 2, in the garden of Eden God had breathed life into Adam and walked and held cordial conversation with him. In John's second resurrection story, in this nameless garden Jesus, with a single word, addressing Mary by name, restores her to life abundant and enfolds her in his sweet embrace.

So many of the images of the resurrection are filled with bombast, with fireworks, with triumphalism, with the fierce taste of vindication and victory. And I think that is OK. Especially if you are oppressed, afflicted, endangered, if you are a broken and beleaguered Kosovar Albanian, if you are Matthew Shepard's parents, if you have suffered much and long and unjustly, I think you may well want to visualize resurrection as triumph over enemies, as defeat of the forces of death, as vindication of your every claim to justice. And Christ's resurrection is all of that. So in painting, homiletical rhetoric, and the grand and glorious Easter hymns, some of which we sing this morning,

that wild, exultant shout of victory sets the tone. And we all say, Hallelujah! And that's good! Yes, that's very good!

But that is not this particular gospel's resurrection story. When all the singing, the blasts of trumpets, the beat of drums, the blazing fireworks have had their play and the sun has gone down to rise again tomorrow on a very ordinary day, it is this gospel's resurrection, this quiet, gentle, intimate resurrection, this relational resurrection that lives on to sustain us through the weeks and months and years of our very ordinary lives.

It is as though this resurrection story, this delicate, winsome, loving tryst of two human beings in a garden, symbolizes for us that at the heart of the cosmos is a love which knows each of us by name and enfolds us in its sustaining, supporting embrace. If the risen Christ fills the cosmos, it is compassion that fills the cosmos, compassion that counts the hairs of our heads, divines our deepest longings and our darkest secrets, calls us by our very name, and holds us and cares for us in this and every actual moment from here to eternity. This is Emmanuel, God with us, of ancient story.

What does it mean, this resurrection rendezvous in the garden, what is its import for us? Doesn't it place its blessing on every garden, on every spring bursting alive with new life. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Nothing is so beautiful as spring –  
    When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
    Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;  
    The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush  
    The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush  
With richness; the racing limbs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?  
    A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,  
    Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,  
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,  
    Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

What does this resurrection mean, what does it really mean, the tormented people of Yugoslavia might ask. And I want to respond to them with a vision of Yugoslavia, a garden between two worlds, which has been and can be what the risen Christ who met Mary in a garden and tends the garden of the whole cosmos intends for Yugoslavia to be, what we all must intend that it shall be beyond the horror and despair of today's misery, in the words of poet Amy Clampitt:

Yugoslavia: the scythe, the kerchief, the happy pink  
of climbing roses, cherries ripening among green leaves,  
childhoodlike as a medieval codex; storks, magpies,  
yoked oxen; sentry boxes; roadside memorial wreaths  
that fade and gather dust encased in plastic;

the ineradicable red of poppies, flimsy-petaled,  
hardier than any culture. emblazoning the fields  
of wheat and barley, proof of labor with the mattock,  
of women hoeing in the fields all morning  
with respite under poplar trees at noon, the labor

of whole families at evening. Seeing them lying  
in the grass, seeing them in immemorial attitudes  
of rest beside a river, under poplar trees  
at evening, I find myself now half in love  
with the hard fact of the ubiquity of labor

in the fields all day, with respite in the happy  
pink of climbing roses, the ripening red-in-green  
of cherries: half in love with the massed groves,  
the long march of poplars on the Macedonian plain,  
where minarets are rigid with the grief of Asia,

where gypsy vans give proof some part of all of us  
would flee from labor, some part of all of us is  
always far from home. People's democracies cannot undo  
(or can they?), though they try, the fact of the sad heart  
of Ruth, or of the beauty of this scene it is so easy

to be half in love with, as the train engine slows,  
and from wild thickets bordering the embankment, so  
close one can reach out and touch, the smell of bergamot  
drifts in, birdsong detains the ears -- a warbled 'chook'  
so immemorially loud I think, Can it be nightingales?

Gardens are plowed, gardens are tilled, gardens are cultivated. Gardens are not only  
about lying in the grass and sniffing the daisies. What does this resurrection mean, what  
does it really mean, the Mary's of our own generation might ask. And can't I recite back  
the words of congresswoman and activist Bella Abzug, speaking in August 1995 to the  
International Women's Conference in Beijing, China:

Women have been trained to speak softly (that is, some of us) and to carry a lipstick. We are no longer content to sit only at the kitchen table -- women must be at all the tables where decisions of life and death are made! Security is what we all seek, but security comes from within, from inner strength. It emanates from our ability to love and treasure the peoples of the earth, especially those with whom we may not agree or those who are different from us. . . . I remain an incurable optimist. . . . I wish each of you well and sustainable optimism for the days ahead. Never underestimate, and we do not, the importance of what we are doing here, never hesitate to tell the truth, and never give in -- or give up!

What does this resurrection mean? What does it really mean for today?

In "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front," poet Wendell Berry detects the subversive subtext of this clandestine meeting in the garden, the revolutionary implication in the Palestinian culture of Jesus' day of rabbi meeting alone with woman— resurrection as the promise and the challenge to turn over the earth, to plant and nurture new growth, to protect the earth's garden from napalm, every mother's child from slaughter, every love from constraint, every good and innocent will from corruption. Ecologist, farmer, philosopher, poet Wendell Berry writes:

"Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?  
Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection."

Jesus, our dear sweet rabbi, calls you and me by name, takes us in his arms, holds us close, makes us safe, and whispers in our ears, "Practice resurrection. Try resurrection on for size. Give it a whirl. Let resurrection fill your life as it fills the cosmos so that you never give in or give up, so that you leave tracks in all directions, so that you run home and tell your friends and family that hope's alive and compassion set loose upon the earth, so that you join Peter and that other one that Jesus was so fond of, and, of course, Mary, in love's revolution.