

St Andrew's on the Terrace Easter Sunday 1 April 2018

Readings for the Gathering Gospel

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Jesus Has Risen

Mark 16: 1-8

'Unseasonable Journey'

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[]=text omitted from music setting

I remember it as if it were yesterday
the day he set his face
and turned towards Jerusalem.

We all knew that look,
all of us women who followed him
Mary, Joanna,
Susanna and the rest,
we knew, all of us,
once that look was in his eyes
and his jaw set in that determined way
nothing any of us could say could change his mind.

An autumn chill
whispered its way
around my heart
the long, lovely summer
of camaraderie and companionship
was over

for I knew
we all knew
(especially him, although he never said)
death
lay at the end of this unseasonable journey

Looking back now,
I remember the slow,
inevitable
irrevocable
feel of that time

his words falling on our ears
as leaves fall
one by one
from trees
weeping away their life
in golden tears

*[afterwards, we looked back,
surprised at the depth
of golden leaves
which had gathered at our feet]*

the first few leaves
fluttered gently to the ground
as he told the men to let the children be
'the kingdom belongs to such as these', he said.
We women knew what he meant
we know children
the gut honesty
that hasn't been veneered with social graces yet.
We knew what he meant.

Reflection for the Gathering

Recently I read what felt like an archaeological thriller. It wasn't about Harrison Ford and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. It was about two elderly Scottish gentlewomen living at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th. Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson were an intrepid pair of twin sisters who travelled down the Nile and around Europe. The crowning glory of their achievements, however, was to discover in 1892 the then earliest known version of Mark's Gospel; the one that finishes at verse 8 as Sandra finished reading today. Though written almost four centuries after Jesus' life and death, this version was still

And it seemed a single golden leaf
gently touched my hair
As I heard him say
'Mary has chosen the better part
it shall not be taken from her'

and it hasn't.

A few more leaves fell
when he wept over the city

the stormy tension was all through Jerusalem
like one of those autumn storms
that pulls leaves from the trees in jealous fury

but once,
there was a lull,
when, through the heavy scent of ointment
above the woman's tears he said to the stony faces
above him
'she has done this for my burial'
and a shower of golden leaves
joined the others on the ground.

But autumn ends
with gaunt skeletons
against a wintry sky

and so his end came
on a gaunt tree
starkly black
amidst a darkened day

~~and a chill of winter~~-----
settled on my soul
the pile of leaves
about my feet
lost their glow
as the promises lost their power.
The cold went deep within me,
and even when love had burst forth
out of season
life in the middle of death
warmth in the heart of winter,
and the leaves at my feet
had regained their golden glow
[for now I knew the promises were true]
the memory of that desolation remained

Reminding me God does not wait for spring
but offers life in winter
for love knows no season.

Luke 8:2-3 Luke 9:51

hundreds of years older than the previously oldest copies known. The story of their discovery and the later struggle for recognition by academic authorities makes engrossing reading. (The sisters were also the founders of Westminster College where I spent time on study leave in 2013 so it had added interest on that account.)

How long and how well can *you* remember a story? How traumatic does an incident need to be to be remembered accurately? Well, accurately enough to be called a 'true eye witness account'? The poem which Vivien set to music starts "I remember it as if it were yesterday". Certainly a moment when you are expecting to dress a dead body with spices, when you are tired and grief-stricken and this hugely unexpected event happens is traumatic. More memorable we would have thought, than anything that would have happened in these women's lives.

This older version of Mark's Gospel (without verses 9-20 added later) suggests the women told no one, yet that the story of their arrival at the garden tomb and their shock and surprise is recorded here suggests that eventually perhaps quite soon, they told someone. Or this is what we might call a 'made-up' story.

But to even speculate on that is to apply our usual kind of enlightenment thinking. Since the Enlightenment of the 18th century, we Westerners have been scientifically oriented. We expect facts. We expect facts which can be proven. We expect accuracy. We expect a linear view of history which gives us an precise timeline of what exactly happened. Did Claire diary the meeting? What it informal or not? What did Carol say? In true Enlightenment fashion the media have been searching for facts all week

That's not what we are going to find in Scripture. It was not written that way or for that reason. The Gospels, we think, were written at least, the earliest of them, Mark the one we read from today, five decades after Jesus birth – twenty or more years after his death.

Just recently I got very, very angry with my brother in the aftermath of my father's funeral. I was retelling an old family story and he corrected me on the details in front of others. (One of those people is here today and I am sure she remembers the awkward moment as I swallowed what I might otherwise have said to my older brother!) He was disputing who was taking the two photographs about which I was talking. I thought one was taken by Dad and the other by my brother. He said my brother was taking both of them. He might well be right. I obviously can't remember!

But for me the point of the story was the expressions in the two photographs. He and I were holding big icicles we had discovered by the side of the road to Milford Sound on a winter holiday. The first picture shows us smiling happily. The second picture shows us scowling at the photographer and obviously saying "Hurry up!" This all took place about 53 years ago, though the story has been rehearsed several times as we have gone through family photographs from time to time.

If my brother is right, my version of the story was inaccurate regarding who was taking the photo. Had I not been too angry to complete the story at the table that day, the human story of cold icicles, impatience with a oldest brother fiddling with his new camera, irritation between siblings and a glimpse of human nature would still have been seen, whether or not the identity of the photographer or photographers was known accurately. The story still could have conveyed the point without the facts necessarily being right. (though I would like to say that I still think I was right and he was wrong!)

So what is the equivalent in this Easter narrative of human nature?

Whether or not the tomb was empty and whether or not Jesus was walking in the garden somewhere ready to be unrecognised by Mary Magdalene in that famous encounter... what is the point of this story?

I actually wonder if the point is way back about Good Friday or Easter Saturday somewhere. Just as the point of my photo story might have been way back with the formation of the icicles.

Some of us have suffered over the years through a massive conflation of ideas regarding Good Friday. The traumatic death of a good man and wise teacher has been conflated with shame and guilt on our part because his death has been linked inextricably with our apparent sinfulness and need for redemption. Good Friday and its associated events have become a big black ball of shame, guilt, fear, blame, anxiety and general scariness. I heard the other day that hospice chaplains, nurses and doctors notice that Christians are often more afraid to die than people without a church background? That shows the measure of the fear induced by association of the Cross with sin and hell and heaven and pain and judgement. Our reaction over recent years has been to reject that judgmental take on Jesus' death. Who can blame anyone for that? But, I think in the process, we may have sanitised what was going on on Good Friday.

A more helpful association is that ancient legends and mythology identify the cross as a tree of life. Like the tree of life, with its roots in the earth and its reaching upwards to the sky, the cross symbolically links the earth and the heavens, links human and divine.

To be such a link entails the great amount of self-emptying goodness which we saw in Jesus in his life and in his selfless death. To be the lightning rod between earth and heaven is to demand much of one person.

I wouldn't like to compare myself with Jesus on almost any level, but it is true that after each Sunday Gathering I have always found that I am very, very tired. It isn't all about how late I went to sleep the night before (though I could improve that) or how early I get up on Sunday morning. It has to do with the spiritual exchange that happens here during these moments. That's why I tell you all that any arrangements you might make or try to make with me after church need to be confirmed by email. I'm not in any fit state to remember details at that point. I'm open to people talking with me and perhaps commenting on the Gathering, that's part of the experience, but not making the time for a meeting or remembering what I said last week.

Multiply that fifty million times and we might get somewhere near the psychic and spiritual energy Jesus expended on Good Friday. It took it out of him. He suffered. He died. He did not save himself in any way from the full brunt of what Tony named on Friday as one of the most cruel forms of execution the world has known.

This is not to turn this reflection into a Mel Gibson movie (though I'm up for a discussion with anyone as to whether the violence in the passion of the Christ was in fact gratuitous or not). This is not to dwell on the particularly gruesome nature of Jesus' death but to say that this is a moment of **transformation** we celebrate each Easter. And a true transformation requires a death before there can be new life.

Just like the caterpillars we talked about with the children earlier. The caterpillar has to be no more for each butterfly to exist. For the transformation from one travelling preacher in Palestine to a world-wide faith, strangely, the key person needed to die, even though he was probably only about 33 years old.

Have you noticed how hard we generally try to keep something which is going well, keep on going? We urge older people on to their next birthday, we try to eke out the existence of churches which are shrinking and shrinking, we keep on with old patterns long after they have passed their use by date.

Yesterday being Transgender Day of Visibility, I found myself pondering the loss side of the transgender transition; that those moving to their ideal gender identity must at the same time give up the identity they have been living externally all their lives thus far. This may be a relief but it can't be easy. Their families give up a son as they gain a daughter, or they lose their daughter to receive their new son, or they lose certainty as their child identifies as non binary. The death of the old identity, we could say, precedes the new identity – at least that is how it seems from the outside. This is true with anyone who makes a large change in their lives. You can't hold on to the old life while living the new. No having your cake and eating it too. Transformation demands much of us, just as it demanded much of Jesus.

Think of a change you have resisted in the past. When you finally gave in was it really as bad as you thought it would be? What new thing could then happen, which you might not have expected, which gave a whole new slant on the situation?

You know, maybe the details of the Easter story are not the point. Instead, the concept of death to life is the point. For us to be able to embrace new life, to be able to explode like a butterfly into the bright clean air of a new world, we need to let go whatever is holding us up. I can't tell you what that is for you.

I'm thinking perhaps I need to let go my resentment about which photographer it was and let the story of the icicles be what it is - a commentary on our common humanity, whoever made the shot.

We need to let go our certainties, whether that certainty is about whether Jesus rose again or whether that certainty is that he didn't.

We need to let go that argument and live into the questions:

What new life beckons me?

What death do I need to go through to make it possible?

This is not just one decision to be born again,
we face the grace of transformation
daily, weekly, monthly, every year of our lives.

Constantly we are being challenged to let go and **live**.

We will know it is a true transformation
if the shadow of the death which precedes it
hovers a little over the new joy of the new day.

Remember the end of the poem in the anthem?

*The cold went deep within me,/ and even when love had burst forth
out of season/ life in the middle of death
warmth in the heart of winter,/ and the leaves at my feet
had regained their golden glow/ for now I knew the promises were true
the memory of that desolation remained*

Reminding me God does not wait for spring/ but offers life in winter/ for love knows no season.

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