

Sermon for Easter Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Now, I know I'm breaking just about every rule of preaching by diving right on in, but I gotta admit something. I have read this Gospel reading more times than I can count, I've heard it every Easter since I was a kid, I've taught it and written papers on it and discussed the nuance of Greek in its pages but never once, not a single time before this week did it ever strike me as odd that in the midst of the greatest moment of our story, in the middle of the largest paradigm shift in human history, in the precise moment when Jesus rises triumphantly from the grave, he stops to fold his laundry. He must've! When Mary Magdalene and the disciples find the tomb empty, they notice his burial linens folded up nicely at the foot of the slab. I suppose one of the angels might've tidied up after he'd left, but probably not. Maybe he was so well-raised as to hear his mother's voice echoing in his mind, "What, were you born in a barn? Make that bed before you start your day." John Chrysostom thinks this little detail is evidence of the actual, bodily resurrection. Some naysayers said the Disciples made up the story of the Resurrection, and it was actually graverobbers who had removed Jesus' body. John Chrysostom says graverobbers wouldn't have wasted time stripping burial linens from a body, not to mention folding them up in a neat little stack. Also, the myrrh the women used to prepare Jesus' body for the grave would have acted like a glue, adhering the linens to his flesh; even if the fabled graverobbers had wanted to strip his linens away, it would've been far too much of a hassle. There's another story that says when Jesus was resurrected, his body passed through the linens just as his body would later pass through walls. In resurrecting this way, the linens are left behind in the shape of his body, sort of like a hollow cartoon mummy. It makes me think of trying to sneak out at night by hiding a pillow under the blankets to trick my parents into thinking it was me still under the covers.

Truth is, I'm less interested in just exactly the mechanics of Jesus' laundry, and more interested in just what exactly he was getting up to in there. From the moment the Resurrection becomes real to the moment he leaves the tomb, what was going on? Our story's full of snippets of what's happened. All of last week, we moved closer to the cross and closer to Jesus' death. On Friday, we witnessed that death together, and we acknowledged that he "descended to the dead" or "descended to hell." Either way, Jesus is good and dead. His body is taken down for burial, and beautiful moments of generosity spring up. Joseph of Arimathea gives his own burial plot away and bargains with Pilate for his body. The women in his life lovingly clean his wounds, wipe the dirt from his neck, remove the last bits of thorn from his brow. They lay him in stone, and leave in tears as he's sealed away. It's a moment full of pain and disappointment and fear and sorrow.

Meanwhile, Jesus moves among the dead. Making them and that place holy. The stories of what happens then and what goes on there vary, but on the whole they agree on this: he goes there to defeat the claim death has on us. And he succeeds. All those parts are there. But you know what's not? What happens between when Jesus leaves the land of the dead behind and returns to us, the quick, the living, and the loved. That's what I want to know. Does Jesus wake up bright eyed and bushy tailed? Or is he groggy, desperately looking for the resurrection snooze button? Does he leap off the slab and get to folding, or does he rise slowly, stretch, and fumble in the dark for the stone at the tomb's mouth?

It's a quiet moment, I suspect, as quiet as they come. And it's intimate. In that darkness, there is no one but God and the Beloved Son. We've seen that before, in Gethsemane just a few days ago. Jesus snuck away from his disciples while they tried to hold heavy eyes open to keep watch. But they failed, and they slept. And in that silent solitude, Jesus spoke with God. He asked if this really had to happen. He asked if there was any other way. And finally, he agreed to the terms of resurrection: namely, you've got to die, first. So, we've seen his intimate prayers before, but we don't see this one. Jesus and God alone in the dark. I have to assume there's love in that space. And profound purpose. And maybe even a pause to appreciate the last few moments of quiet

before the stone rolls aside and the work begins again. Jesus is resurrected in silence, in darkness, in solitude while his disciples sleep again. It's an unseen silence, and in it great mystery swirls.

We aren't privy to that moment, and especially after Holy Week, we're not used to missing out on details. We've heard all the juicy bits of the story up until now, and suddenly the story glosses over a rather important moment. But maybe it's because of just how vital this moment is that we don't get to see it. Maybe it's value is so greatly wrapped up in its unknown qualities that to know them would sully them. Like the dramatic equivalent of "don't meet your heroes." I love that I can let my imagination run wild with that moment, and if I were to know what happened, maybe the wonder of it would fade. And in the world we live in, the last thing I need is for any part of the Resurrection to lose its wonder. Because after whatever happened for however long, Jesus does emerge from that dark tomb and sets to work again. Blinking away the darkness, he sees the world in its true light. Blindingly bright, at first, then fading into focus, a world fundamentally changed because of what has just happened, but on the surface no different than it was when he left a few days before. Blinking away the darkness and squinting into the light, he sees what we all see all the time. That this world desperately needs him. This world desperately needs the grace that promises justice and forgiveness. This world desperately needs righting, and God knows we can't do it alone.

This is our second Easter to be separated by screens and brought together by a technology I frankly don't understand. And since Easter of last year, we have had the real character of our world revealed far too many times. There is so much brokenness, it's utterly overwhelming. I can't speak for everyone, but I know I had the darkest year of my life. And dark as it was, it was always at its darkest when I let myself believe that it was up to me alone to fix this broken world. But just as Christ was brought back to us in the swirling dark of that tomb, the hope for this world I so desperately needed came in that darkness, too. And that hope was the reminder, that while I do have a part to play, it isn't up to me to fix this world. That's on God.

What a relief Easter brings. That when the empire has won, and friends have betrayed, and hope is lost, it's up to Christ to set it all right again. And thanks be to God, today Christ is back. And with that relief comes a mighty call to action. It's not my job to save the world. Christ has done that, begun on a Friday many years ago, and saving still this very morning. But it is my job to race to see what I can do next, with the Kingdom of God on top, friends restored, and hope returned. God Is Among Us, and so we begin again. I gotta wonder, if Jesus laid in that dark tomb for a moment before leaving, did he wiggle his toes to make sure they still worked? Did he know what would come as he stepped out? Did he savor the moment, did he have a to-do list, did he know what his return would do for us? I would love to know what swirled in his mind then, but I'm happy to imagine in the unknowing. And I'm grateful for whatever came in that moment. Because in that mystery, somehow, Jesus stood and stepped toward us again. In spite of all we did to him, he returned. And he asked us to keep telling the story, keep living the life, and come with him. In our own waking, in those moments between when our minds shift from dream to awareness, when our eyes blink open and then squeeze back shut for another precious moment of rest, in our own waking, I wonder if we might begin to think as Christ did in his own waking. Unknown, untold secrets arise there. But maybe, maybe they hold the seeds for wonders worked in the name of God. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!