

Sermon for Easter Day, March 27, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

The earth was silent
when the woman came.
Hurriedly,
quietly,
slipping through the sleepy streets,
a few small coins passed
to the guard on the gate of the city walls,
and she was outside,
the air chill
and the damp seeping up underfoot,
trees threateningly twisted
in the moon's
cold gray light.
And she reached the tomb, a new one, she thought for a moment
that she had the wrong place.
Because she had seen it,
she had seen it
when they put his body there,
and they had pushed the stone
across the hole,
and the limestone glowed in the moonlight,
pale where the rock had so recently been chipped away,
just as she remembered it.
But the stone
was gone
and a gaping hole
in its place.

And she turned, and ran,
ran back across the cold gray garden,
back through the city gate,
back to where
the disciples were staying.
“He's gone, he's gone, and I don't know
where they've put him!”

And Peter and John
grabbed their cloaks
and headed after her,
the streets now stirring
in the early daylight,
and John caught up,
and then ran ahead
and there, just as she had said,
the creamy limestone
and black hole,
and inside the hole
no body,
just rags of linen
lying
we he had been laid.
And Peter, pushing past,
found the same,
and the cloth from his head
rolled up in a corner,
and John
followed him in,
and saw where the body had been,
and believed, but what did he believe?
And the two of them turned
and without a word
walked back home,
the city
rising to life
around them.

Leaving Mary Magdalene
weeping.

The birds had begun to sing
but she was deaf.
The sun was beginning to rise
but she was blind.
The earth was beginning to warm
and with it
the scent of creation

but she could not smell.
All she knew
was death.

And she looked in
to that black black hole
in the limestone
now gold bright, touched by the sun,
and saw
two men in white.
And didn't see them.
The words she spoke
were the same words
that she cried in panic to the disciples.
"He's gone, he's gone, and I don't know
where they've put him!"
And they
in turn
were silent.
All she knew
was death.

And she turned away
tear-dried tracks
down her face,
blind and deaf and senseless.
To see
through swollen eyes
a man,
and hear him speaking,
"What's wrong?"

And the same words,
or something like them.
"He's gone, he's gone, and I don't know
where they've put him!"

"Mary?"

"Teacher?"

And it was not
a corpse
that she was looking at.
All she knew
was death,
but here
in front of her
was life.
Life
that sounded
and looked,
and yes, even smelled
like her dear friend,
Jesus.
Her friend,
her teacher,
her savior.
Standing there
in front of her
as if
the nightmare
of the past three days
had never happened.
Life.
Life.
Life in all its fullness.

And then,
as if she had reached
to hug him,
Jesus said,
don't grab hold of me.
Because there is more to life than me, there is more to life than this.
Run, run as you ran to the disciples
to tell them I was missing,
run
and tell them
that I am alive!

And Mary, Mary Magdalene,
the one who only knew death, now
knew life
and she turned
and ran, ran again
through that garden
that once had been
cold and grey
but now was bursting with growth,
full of avian
alleluias,
ran through the gate
startling the guard,
through the streets
once dark and silent,
pushing past the donkey cart
making early morning deliveries,
throwing a coin to the child begging in a doorway,
waving as she passed
arriving outside
the house where the disciples were staying
and banging on the door,
“He’s risen, don’t you know? He’s risen!”

One of the most difficult things about being a priest
is trying to find something to say each year
at the great festivals of Christmas and Easter.
You all know the stories;
you don’t need me to stand up here
and regurgitate them.

But one of the things that always surprises me
as I do my sermon prep,
is that somehow, somewhere
I always discover something
that I hadn’t thought of before.
This year, I foolishly offered to run a workshop for other clergy
on preaching Easter.

And in the process, I discovered some wonderful preaching
from hundreds of years ago
that gave me a new insight
into the resurrection
and what it means for us.

On Sunday the sixteenth of April, 1620,
in the Palace of Whitehall,
where English kings then lived,
in front of King James,
Lancelot Andrewes, the bishop of Winchester,
preached a sermon on the resurrection.
In it, he focused on this same story
that we have heard today, from the gospel according to John,
and instead of focussing on the disciples
and their response
he talks of Mary,

“Surely if she would have been glad
but to have found but His dead body,
now she finds it and Him alive,
what was her joy,
how great may we think!
... Well now, He that was thought lost is found again,
and found,
not as He was sought for,
not a dead body,
but 'a living soul';
no, 'a quickening Spirit' then.
And that might Mary Magdalene well say.
He shewed it,
for He quickened her,
and her spirits that were as good as dead.
You thought you should have come to Christ's resurrection today,
and so you do.
But not to His alone,
but even to Mary Magdalene's resurrection too.
For in very deed a kind of resurrection it was wrought in her;
revived as it were,
and raised from a dead and drooping,

to a lively and cheerful estate.
The gardener had done His part,
made her all green on the sudden.”

You see, I suspect that we often think
that Easter is just about
the resurrection of Jesus.

But as Andrewes reminds us,
Jesus’

resurrection
had an impact
that went far beyond
himself.

All Mary Magdalen knew when she went to the tomb
that very first
Easter morning,
all she knew
was death.

But what she discovered
was life.

When all she had smelled
was decay,
she smelled creation.

Where all she had seen
was a blackened hole,
she saw

the face of her friend.

Where all she had heard
was silence,
she heard birds singing
and the voice of her teacher, her savior.

She was as good as dead.

And that first Easter morning
life chose her,
and she embraced it.

It’s so easy
to be fixated on death,

isn't it?
Bombs exploding in an airport,
a train station,
photographs
of bewildered passengers
clothes torn away, wounds bleeding.
An ocean away but far too near,
bringing back memories
of a day of destruction
fifteen years ago.

Political campaigns
threatening chaos and carnage
if you vote the wrong way.

And in our own lives
the sadness
of relationships torn
and promises broken
and dreams disappointed.
And especially
as we gather around the table
for a holiday celebration
memories
of those who are not with us,
death made visible.

Like Mary,
we know
death.
But death
is not all there is.
As Mary discovered
when she turned
and saw her Lord.
And life
chose her.
Life, in all its fulness,
and she went
rushing to tell the disciples,

He is risen!

And with her,
in the resurrection of our Savior
we can
know life.

Life in all its color,
life in all its clamor,
life in all its sweetness.
In Christ, life has chosen you.
Embrace it!

And run,
tell the world
Death is defeated.
Life is triumphant.
Christ is risen!

Life is yours for ever, Mary,
for your light is come once more
and the strength of death is broken;
now your songs of joy outpour.
Ended now the night of sorrow,
love has brought the blessed morrow.
Let your alleluias rise.