

Easter Day, Year A, 2014
 St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
 The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

One of my favorite children's books
 which some of you have read
 at our Christmas Eve service,
 is called "The Nativity." It's the story of Jesus's birth taken straight from the King James
 Version of the Bible,
 but illustrated by a woman called Julie Vivas, who paints the story in watercolors
 in ways that I suspect
 that the people who translated the King James Version of our Scriptures
 could never have imagined.

On the very first page, we are introduced to the Angel Gabriel.
 Instead of appearing in Renaissance glory, tall and handsome, with gold leafed wings, pristine
 white robes,
 and a serene expression on his face,
 this Gabriel's wings
 are yellow and pink and blue and green and purple,
 with tears in the ends where he's damaged them in crash
 landings,
 and his brown hair sticks up every which way.
 His greenish blue robe has holes in the knees,
 and on his feet are big clumpy hiking boots
 with the laces untied.
 He's the sort of angel who crashes into trees,
 and who sits at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee,
 who rides sheep bareback
 when he's supposed to be concentrating on bringing
 good news to the shepherds,
 and who dangles from a branch in order to talk with camels at eye level.
 And at the end of the story, there he is, holding the baby Jesus
 while his poor mother Mary tries to get back up
 on the donkey.

Now fast forward 33 years. Because I have a sneaking suspicion
 that it's the same angel
 who appears at the tomb on Easter morning.
 Or if it wasn't him,
 it was another one
 not so different.
 Though I'm jumping ahead.

Because the way the gospel
according to John
tells it,
there were no angels to be seen
that first Easter morning,
not at first, anyway.

It was dark when Mary Magdalene
came to the tomb,
perhaps just the first flush of gray in the sky,
but certainly no sign of the sun.
She was tired, clothing worn,
eyes red and bloodshot from crying, and even though she'd washed her face
you could still see the trails the tears had made.
And the garden a shadowy place
full of the ghostly shapes of figs and lives and vines,
and a rough rock face with a hole, and mud where they had trampled getting his body in.

But there was enough light
to see it.
The hole.
Where just 36 hours before
a huge rock
had covered the entrance
to the tomb.

And she ran,
back through that ghostly garden,
back into the city,
back to the place
where Simon Peter and John
were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes.
"They have him out of the tomb,
and we don't know where they have put him."

Peter and John didn't know either. Perhaps
she had been confused,
mistaken his tomb
for another, empty
one.

But she was insistent.
"I know it! It was his tomb. And now they have taken him away,

and I don't know where he is!"

And so they ran, back the way she had come,
jostling one another
to see who would be first
to prove her wrong.

And John arrived there first,
and it was as Mary had said,
a gaping hole
where the stone had been.
And he bent over to look inside,
and there on the floor
was a piece of white cloth,
dusty and stained with spices,
and then Peter pushed past him
and there
where his body had been
there was nothing.
Just bare rock
and two pieces of cloth,
one for his body
and one for his head.

And the two disciples turned
and went home again.

But Mary,
Mary had followed them back to the tomb,
and when they left, she stayed,
crying again
for her dead and now lost Lord.
And finally
she scraped up the courage
to look inside,
and there
where he should have been, there were two figures,
angels,
not, this time, in blue green robes and rainbow wings,
but the purest
brightest white,
except for the streaks of dirt
where they rubbed against the dusty stone,
but they are as plain-spoken

as Gabriel was,
“Woman,
what are you crying about?”
“They’ve taken him away!”

And then again, but this time from behind her.
“Woman,
what are you crying about? Who are you looking for?”

And Mary,
embarrassed, confused, hurt,
turns
and sees through her tears
another shadow.
“Please, please tell me
where they have put him?”

“Mary.”
And she looks up,
and his clothes are as multicolored as that first angel’s wings, all pink and yellow and green and blue and purple blending into one gorgeous rainbow of color, his skin fresh and new like a newborn baby’s. But his voice, his voice she knows.

“Rabbouni. Teacher.”
And she throws herself at him,
and gently
he untangles her.
“Mary. You can’t hold on to me. Go, go tell my disciples
that I am alive.”
And the colors of his life wash over her,
and suddenly she is no longer a teary red eyed mourner in dingy clothing,
but transformed,
her clothing washed golden in the light of his life
her face lit up with joy,
reflecting a world that has suddenly burst into color,
glowing with the message,
“Christ is risen!”

That’s the way I imagine it would look
if Julie Vivas took it into her head
to illustrate this story. It would look real.
And that’s what’s so important about this picture book version.
Because most times, when we see pictures of how people imagine the resurrection

it's not really believable. Everyone looks perfectly composed,
their clothing well ironed, their faces clean,
the scenery
as if it had been designed
by an expert landscape gardener.
There is no tragedy of death
lurking in the background, no cross standing vigil against the sky.

But if the gospels are anything to go by, the resurrection, if it was nothing else, was real.
As real as the pain, as real as the suffering, as real as the despair
that all of us know goes along with the death of someone we love. They had watched Jesus die,
had seen the thorns drip blood down his face, the nails tear at his hands and feet, the spear rip
into his side. They'd been there
when he breathed his last, gasping breath, when the earth had shaken the first time and the rocks
shuddered into pieces.
They'd been there when they took his body down, and wrapped it in a cloth, and put it in a stone-
hewn tomb.
This was real. There was no doubting it. Jesus was dead.

That's why the two on their way to Emmaus
didn't recognize him at first.
That's why Thomas couldn't believe it
when the other disciples told him they'd seen Jesus.
That's why the disciples didn't believe the women
the first time they told them that Jesus was risen.
His death was real.

And so was his resurrection.
When Jesus came out of the tomb, it wasn't just a figment of their imaginations, a bit of wishful
thinking from people who would have been better off staying home till they got over their grief.
This wasn't a beautiful scene from a Hallmark card.
This is real.
Life at its fullest, life with the same intensity
that you find in a new baby,
the same energy
as a young child. This is life, life so strong
that it's infectious, raw, powerful, life-giving.

People were in shock, unable at first to believe the evidence of their own eyes.
Stumbling around, uncertain, and then shock giving way to joy,
as the wonder of it all dawned upon them,
as they discovered their lives transformed
by the irresistible life of the risen Lord.

And it's still real. Jesus is still risen. And still
his life is powerful enough to transform our lives, his life is irresistible enough
that we can't help but be drawn in.
"Come," he says. "Follow me! Death has lost the battle, and life has won! Tell everybody!
Alleluia!"

Christ is risen. Alleluia!!!!
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!!!!