

"Life as Response"
Year A, Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014
Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18
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A teacher asks the class of young people at a Christian school what the first words of Jesus are after he rises from the dead. One child eagerly waves his arm in the air hoping to get called on. The teacher, wanting to draw out some of the quieter students, ignores this excited hand. But after several attempts at answers that just weren't quite right, the teacher finally calls on this confident child. "Ok, what was the first thing Jesus says after rising from the dead?" The child stands up, spreads his arms out wide and proclaims with a smile, "Ta-da!"

That's one of my favorite Easter stories! "Ta-da" is not what we expect to hear, as if Jesus is pulling some magic. But to an excited child that's the kind of thing Easter may remind them of: Jesus doing something amazing but we just don't exactly "know" how this all happened.

One of the people we have learned from in our adult Sunday school during Lent is Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At some point he talked about the Apostle Paul, saying Paul is basically a mystic: which he defines as "one who has moved from mere belief systems or belonging systems to actual inner experience. Some call this movement *conversion*, some call it *enlightenment*, some *transformation*, and some *holiness*." (The Naked Now, Learning to See as the Mystics See, Crossroad Press, 2009, pp. 29-30). We see it this morning in our scriptures! The disciples run to the tomb, look inside, and *believe* even though they did not *understand* the scriptures, and the New Testament hadn't even been written yet. And Mary, when she sees Jesus, didn't recognize him with her *eyes*, didn't know with her mind that he was Jesus; yet she's the first to *experience* the presence of the Risen Christ. Rohr calls this "Third Eye Seeing" because around 1100, the early medieval period, "two Christian philosophers at the monastery of St. Victor in Paris had names for these three ways of seeing,...each building on the previous one. The first eye was the eye of the flesh (thought or sight), the second was the eye of reason (meditation or reflection), and the third eye was the eye of true understanding (contemplation)," which leads to wisdom. But since most churches, governments, and leaders can't get past the ego, the small

self, low levels of either-or-thinking, us-and-them seeing; in the desire for control and power, third-eye seeing is not very common and so the term "saint" or "mystic" is not used very often, especially for people who are still alive.

This morning's scriptures are ripe with mystical, third-eye seeing; celebrates the *experience* of those first disciples as the cosmic Christ, our Risen Lord, invites them to trust God's creativity, purpose, and power. Even Paul's words in Colossians invite us to humility and compassion as he reminds us that we have died, and we have been raised with Christ, and our life is hidden with Christ in God. He invites us to contemplation, to putting our mind towards things that are above. Many people misinterpret this, thinking Paul is putting down the earth, or creation; that we don't need to care for the earth but we just need to be heavenly minded. But this is a rough misinterpretation. He's actually inviting us to not just "see" with our eyes, at the earthly things we are surrounded with, and thank God, because we all deal with things like hardship, violence, betrayals, and the quest for security and comfort. The things above include Godly virtues of justice, compassion, grace and love. By focusing on these, the living Christ will be revealed through us because our life is in Christ. Paul is really coming from a high level of mystical, third eye seeing, reminding us that we know because we don't know. Our minds only get us so far, but there are some things reason and rationality cannot get wrapped around, and sacred experience draws us even farther than our mind can go. Easter morning is a profound example as the Risen Christ gifts the world with joy.

Easter Sunday, we celebrate the glory of God shown through the Resurrection; Jesus dying, the Christ rising from the dead! The power of life beyond the grave, death and the tomb unable to hold back God's redemptive, creative life. God's love is relentless as it transforms tears of pain, sorrow, confusion, and suffering, into tears of joy, celebration, mystical experience and amazement.

Each of the Gospel writers presents a different angle as they report not only the events of Easter but the significance behind the events; less as history and more as confessions. The Gospel of John is unique as we see Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb by herself, and in typical fashion John's verses have layers of meaning woven within them. Some of this meaning is found as earlier statements of Jesus find resolution or fulfillment, and some of this meaning comes when we see how even we are tied into the tapestry of God's salvation work, invited to believe without seeing.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early in the morning, "While it was still dark." This dark stillness was much more than a pre-dawn lack of sunlight, but this word-picture shares the experience of the world at its lowest point. The verses that follow Mary on her morning journey gradually illuminate not only the garden scene, but her heart, mind, and soul, and the experience of all believers.

Notice the stone didn't roll away so Jesus could come out. The stone is moved before Mary gets there, but not so Jesus could come out. It's for us! Like Peter and John looking in, like Mary through her tears, stooping over to look inside. God wants us to see that the tomb is empty. In that pre-dawn light, God knows it takes a lot to help us realize that things like death, fear, and sorrow, things that seem so final, are not the last word. And not only does the stone move so that we become witnesses that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead, but Jesus appears.

Do you see the progression? Mary sees the stone is moved and returns to the familiar, to get the others. Peter and John run to the tomb. The younger John reaches the tomb first but stays outside, just looking through the entrance. Peter gets there and goes inside, again visually seeing, assessing the scene. John goes in, taking that further step into something more than visual cues. His rational thought only got him so far, yet he believes, comes to a sense of trust. These two then leave and go home. Sometimes that's as far as people get, as deep as they want to dive into the mystery of resurrection and faith. But Mary is weeping, emotions seeking the fulness of expression. That's when Jesus appears, as she lingers, as she looks, as she starts to experience the limits of visual sight; not recognizing him but thinking he was the gardener. Going from title to person, Jesus calls her "woman" and then "Mary." She thinks he is the gardener, and she experiences the Risen Christ. Why did Jesus appear to Mary?

This is John's way of showing us, the ones who need the stone rolled away, that not only did Jesus rise from the dead, but Christ takes our hand, helps us stand, and leads us on to the land of promise and joy. Christ is with us as we live out our commission. Like Mary, as we move out with that strange mix of fear and joy, Christ helps us to live out our commission, and we discover that Jesus doesn't leave us alone, but Christ is with us and the power of God helps guide us on our way: encouraging, sustaining, and blessing us with the gift of joy in God's presence.

Mary was filled with joy, clinging to Christ: not just physically holding him, but wanting to keep him, to hold that moment, to experience the mystery. But Jesus sends her forward to proclaim what she has seen, not just with eyes.

Do we trust the mystery of God enough to live obediently even when it makes no sense? In other words, do we trust God's grace and love so much that we give God our very life, praying, "Less of me, of my small self, and more of you, more light through the Risen Lord." Do we let the depths of faith and love and relationships and commitment and compassion, what Paul calls "things above" replace the hollow shells of appearance, convenience, selfishness, and misdirected devotion? God moves, and Jesus rose from the dead as the triumphant Christ. God was even kind enough roll away the stone so that we can participate in the joy of salvation and live with humility and compassion as we share not only our joy, but as we share life, we share the living presence of Christ. And this sharing reaches it's fullness when we die before we die, when we ask God to keep our life hidden in Christ, with God. Trusting that in giving our live to God we are raised with Christ, that's when wisdom comes as a gift.

God's intention is to continue shaking the world, to continue rolling away the stone through people of faith so that others can have that joy too. God bridges the gulfs, breaks down the barriers that hurt and divide, and the power of evil does not stand before the Risen Christ. Salvation has come to the world in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord! Thanks be to God for victory over evil, for life's triumph over death, for joy to help us through our suffering and pain, for love that casts out fear, and for Christ's living presence that helps us see with more than our eyes, but with our minds and our hearts and our souls. May God help us to join those disciples and the Apostle Paul on the mystical journey in which we discover joy beyond belief, and live our life as response to the Presence of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

And may God be glorified now and forever. Happy Easter! Amen!