

Luke 24:1-12, Acts 10:34-43
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

Of Doubt and Trust

Susan J. Barnes
St. John's, Minneapolis

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

My seminary classmates had the full range of belief our church embraces--from evangelical to Anglo-Catholic. Though we disagreed on a lot of things when we started our studies, many of us shared a frustration with the phrase, "It's a mystery." That just seemed to be a cop out. We were going to be priests, spiritual leaders; we wanted to have something more authoritative to say.

If we thought three years of seminary would make us more certain, we were soon brought up short. An admired upper class man, preaching his Senior Sermon, said that there were days when he believed every word in the Nicene Creed, and days when he didn't believe a single one! I recall my mixture of shock and relief: shock at hearing such a thing from our seminary pulpit, relief that doubt was okay. Doubt wouldn't keep you from graduating and being ordained!

Indeed, in the beginning there was doubt. Doubt was disciples' first reaction to Jesus' resurrection. Look at today's gospel. Even the women standing in the empty tomb with divine messengers giving the word were reluctant. How else could they react? Resurrection was against the laws of nature--and it still is. The news was incredible to the men whom they told. Their rude dismissal of the women's news as "an idle tale" does set my feminist teeth on edge. But disciples' doubt is not particularly sexist: Thomas doubted the word of a roomful of men.

Today many faithful people in the pews doubt the "fact" of the resurrection.

Sooner or later, though, we all get the deep consolation of the metaphor. It's a truth of life: some things have to die so that others can be born.

It may be a job--even a career. It may be a marriage or another close relationship. Some of those cannot be saved. But some might be remade, reborn themselves. My dear friend Molly and I met our sophomore year at Rice. We were the same height, the same size. We shared ideas, values, experiences, and world views. Strains came when our paths began to diverge in our twenties: Molly married a corporate lawyer and settled down in Houston while I stayed single, free to pursue my art-museum career. We had a miserable couple of years--we couldn't stand to be together and we couldn't bear to accept the loss. We had to die to the idea that we were really "alike"--that being close meant we would have the same kind of lives. Then our precious friendship was reborn.

Denial of the resurrection as a scientific truth is a completely rational position. Yet it stands against a mountain of testimony that "something happened" and that something still does: something so radical it has transformed people's lives ever since. Start with Peter: willful, impulsive Peter, a fisherman and follower, a cowardly denier of Jesus when the chips were down. He became a fearless leader and innovator. Led by the Spirit, he welcomed Gentiles, cast aside centuries of Jewish purity codes regarding food. He ventured far from his home to lead the earliest Christian communities in Rome.

Paul did not know Jesus in the flesh, and persecuted his followers. After his literally-stunning encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul turned his consuming passion, brilliance, energy and eloquence to creating Christian communities around the Roman Empire. Like Peter, Paul risked everything. Both willingly died for the gospel.

Paul's writings are the first of a flood. From Augustine to Anne LaMott, from Theresa of Avila to Theresa of Calcutta we have thousands of first-person accounts of how doubt and faith in Christ led people to lives they never would have imagined--lives of creativity, goodness, service to others. They come from every walk of life, from every profession, every era, every culture, every continent. Remarkable, intelligent, distinguished people like Albert Schweitzer, Francis of Assisi, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and countless others who have made vital contributions to humankind.

The light of Christ's love shines through them. It shines, too, through friends and so many of you: you, with whom I am privileged to walk, whose stories of faith I am blessed to know. Your witness strengthens my hope and my faith.

Still I struggle with doubt. It takes the guise of the critical mind. But it springs from fears in my heart: fear of being wrong, foolish, shamed; fear of being hurt, disappointed; fear (always) of giving up the illusion of control. Fear limits emotional experiences of every kind. Fear that guards the heart also can close it off. Fear shields us not just from sacrifice, shame and sorrow, but from the fullness of joy, love, wonder, and mystery as well.

The first disciples probably had some of the same fears as I: fear of being shamed as wrong or foolish ("an idle tale"), fear of being disappointed or hurt again so soon after the crushing loss of the crucifixion. Add to that the fear of the unknown future, of laying down their own lives. It's a fear I admit I share metaphorically myself.

That first Easter Day, Peter and Mary Magdalene and the rest weren't left long in suspense. According to Luke, before the sun rose again, the Risen Christ had first joined some disciples on the road to Emmaus, then come to the whole company back in Jerusalem. His presence invited them to trust what they had been taught, trust the unique experience of their own eyes so that they could bear witness to an utterly irrational truth: the mystery of the resurrection.

Sometimes I think that like Peter and Thomas I want to see and touch and hear the Risen Christ myself. Then I think NO: What would I do? What would I say? What might be asked of me?

So for now I muddle along, trying to continue growing in trust: trust in the glimpses of the Risen Christ's presence in history, in your lives and in my own..

The Risen Christ calls us to follow him out of the caves of fear, doubt, denial and division in which we entomb ourselves. The Risen Christ invites us to live together fully, authentically, whole-heartedly--with all of the risks and rewards that such a life will bring.

Why would the Creator of the universe reach out to us? To specks of dust on a speck of dust in the cosmos? Why you and me and everyone on this beautiful blue planet?

Why? I cannot say. It's a mystery. It's a beautiful, joyful, wonder-filled mystery.