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St. Peter's, Greenville
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Easter Vigil

The events of this Triduum, these three holy days leading up to the Easter event, have been particularly moving to me this year. Since the Maundy Thursday service, I've been feeling my emotions churn just under the surface: hope, grief, stress, fatigue, expectation, and (I confess) an appropriate dose of guilt. Some years, I feel angry and want to demand that God figure out a different way to redeem us. Other years, I pray at the foot of the cross, wanting to console Jesus and remind him ... to plead with him that he not forget ... his status as God's beloved Chosen One. Sometimes, all I can manage is to simply show up ~ I feel numb through Holy Week, and just go through the motions. For a lot of reasons, this year, it has been particularly important for me to fully engage and be present with the events of Jesus' Passion. So despite my urge to hold back, I keep moving forward, trusting that where I'm headed ... where we are all headed ... is redemptive and good and holy.

Of the four accounts of the Easter event, John is the most real. By that I mean that it reflects a variety of responses to the reality of the empty tomb of those who love Jesus and sincerely desire to follow God's lead. Tonight, we who come from diverse backgrounds with a countless variety of backstories are welcomed into the climax of God's holy drama with all of our hopes and fears and joys and burdens. And although we've come to this moment from all different directions, our trajectory is the same.

Take Mary, for instance. Needing to hold vigil and be physically near Jesus' tomb, she is the first on the scene and she is horrified to discover that it has been disturbed. The enormous stone has been rolled away. Perhaps she was panicked, or indignant, or shocked, or afraid ... or all of the above.

Like many of us, she does not see clearly what is right in front of her. Her experience is too much to absorb, much less comprehend. Her instincts kick in. And so she runs. She ran off to bring someone – anyone – back with her, to validate her experience of trespass and violation. She ran to tell what she saw, and bring someone into her chaos, her fear, her shock because she can't manage the enormity of her experience or the implications of what it might mean on her own.

But we cannot talk of how this experience moved Mary to action without also considering that of Peter and the other disciple.

The guys react rather differently. Once Mary has run to them, bringing news of Jesus' disappearance, they run off together back to the tomb. But the Gospel writer points out that 'the other disciple' outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first and stands at the entrance and peers inside. Peter arrives second, but perhaps not to be bested, bravely enters the dark tomb and looks around. The 'other disciple' goes inside as well and they observe what details they can before leaving Mary, bawling her eyes out, as she stands outside.

This entire episode as recorded by John smacks of a comedy – the men are childish in their apparent rivalry to arrive at the tomb first. I think I would have been filled with a sense of urgency at Mary's words to see the tomb for myself. However I'm fascinated by what their motives might have been. Maybe there was a surge, a thrill, at having the chance to be a first responder to Jesus, dead though he may be. I wonder if they ran because they hoped that what Jesus said about his suffering, dying, and rising again was true. I wonder if Peter in particular also ran in order to compensate for his various failures – particularly his three-fold failure to acknowledge his relationship with Jesus and his failure to stay and bear witness to the horror of the crucifixion.

The other disciple, however, has a conversion moment soon after his arrival. When he enters the dark, he sees the truth of what has happened. He sees the linen wrappings, and Peter may have pointed out that the head covering has been neatly set aside. John tells us that at this moment, he believed.

John is clear that they didn't understand *why* Jesus rose from the dead. If they had, perhaps they would have behaved differently when they left the tomb. It's odd to me that they simply went home, seeking out a place of comfort and familiarity after the morning's events. They must have either seen Mary standing there outside the tomb, weeping in despair. Or they would have known that she was on her way back to the tomb after they set out in their race ~ surely they would have waited just a few minutes until she arrived to tell her what they discovered. Either way, Mary is just as in the dark as she was when she first arrived that morning.

Now that a little while has passed, a million questions must have been flooding her mind: where did they take him? Who could have taken him? Why would they take him and what would they do to him? It's clear that she feels helpless and anxious, confused and lost. She is no longer on the move, running, heading to some

destination, but standing still, stuck perhaps, in her all-consuming grief, and she was alone.

Her state of shock wears off quickly when she hears Jesus say her name. She is flooded with relief and seems to move as to embrace Jesus in a bear hug. Her impulse to hold on to him is quickly thwarted. The one thing she cannot do, he tells her, is to hold on to him. Instead, Jesus redirects her movement by telling her to go and proclaim the Good News to the disciples. And so she does.

Just as we all reach Easter from different directions and in different emotional and spiritual contexts, we are all affected differently by the Easter event. Yes, we are all redeemed, we are all guaranteed life with God, we are no longer bound to sin or death, there is nothing that can possibly hold us back any longer from the fullness of life and love and joy and health and wholeness that God desires for each and every one of us. But how we integrate that knowledge into our everyday life differs from one person to the next.

A few minutes ago, we reaffirmed our baptismal covenant. We promised to do our part to bring about God's Kingdom, trusting that God will hold us up and hold us close as we follow where Christ leads us. Specifically, we promised to continue to be faithful to the communal life of the Church, to persevere in doing the next right thing, to preach the Gospel in word and deed, to seek out and love the Christ in our neighbor as well as our self, and to strive to embody the holy person God created us to be as we live out our relationships with God's other beloveds.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, points out that "Jesus is not willing for us to hold on to him and stay where we are, but rather we are to let Jesus hold us and lead us where he is going."¹ Mary discovered that if she truly loved Jesus, she couldn't hold on to him and allow herself to be held back by her grief, loneliness, anxiety, or indignation. She had to be on the move, she had to step forward in faith; she was to go and proclaim. By the grace of God through the resurrection of Christ Jesus, we, too, have been fundamentally changed, freed from those things that we believe hold us back. We, too, have been commissioned to move forward in faith ~ to go and proclaim Alleluia, Christ is risen!

¹ BBT, *Home by Another Way*, page 112