

Easter Sunday

April 12, 2020

Northbrae Community Church

Sermon: "Easter: Play the Part of the Woman" (Readings copied on the last page)

Have you ever had an experience that felt like it completely changed you?

That's a rhetorical question. Of course you have. Each of us has. There are moments of joy, a first kiss, graduation, a wedding, the birth of a child. And there are sorrowful events: losing a job, or a house, or both; a particularly humiliating failure, the death of a loved one.

Go deeper, into your inner world. Has something ever entered your thoughts, your heart, and turned your world so upside down that your life changed? These events come at us from all directions, mostly without warning, and though we may know in an instant that we are changed, it is a transformation that takes years to unfold.

Again, let's talk about the sweet ones: books of poems, like Walt Whitman, or Anne Carson; music, like hearing Handel's Messiah for the first time. A conversation with a neighbor that brings you to understand there is a world inside them that you never knew about.

And there are the devastating ones. You too are acquainted with them

Our societies go through these profound changes that feel like the world moves with a generous intention: The liberation of Jews from Auschwitz; The Moon Landing; The election of Barack Obama.

Or other times when it feels like society is dissolving in front of us: The Fall of Saigon; The Challenger Explosion; 9/11.

And now.

And now here we are doing the loving thing by staying apart from one another. We don't know how long, how deep, or how bad things will get. This past week was the one where things got real for me. perhaps because the shock is wearing off, but the facts keep on being devastating. Even though we are seeing signs of hope, because our efforts here in the Bay Area at flattening the curve appear to be working, we don't know how long the quarantine will last. We don't know how many more people will become dangerously sick and die. We don't know how many millions more will file for unemployment. We can't fathom how long, how deep, or how bad things will get.

So far, more than 20,000 Americans have died from complications following Covid-19. Among those who died this past week was John Prine. He was a singer song writer who never had a hit record, but who had a devoted following. Bonnie Raitt recorded his songs. So did Johnny Cash. His music tends towards bluegrass, not quite country western, not quite pop. His songs are by turns funny, sweet, dark, profound, and fantastic to sing in a group. Especially on the porch, in the deep green of a summer afternoon when your brother was young and healthy. My brother.

Prine was a mailman before he could make it in music. He said he'd written a lot of his early songs while walking through neighborhoods delivering mail. He had a gift for seeing the humanity, the heartache

and the dignity in people who others forgot. If you know any of his songs, it's probably Angel from Montgomery.

(sung)

I am an old woman named after my mother
My old man is another child that's grown old
If dreams were lightning, thunder were desire
This old house would have burnt down a long time ago

Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery
Make me a poster of an old rodeo
Just give me one thing that I can hold on to
To believe in this living is just a hard way to go

This song turned my world inside out. He could enter so far into the life of someone else, someone so different and sing out her song, her sorrow, and despair.

I must admit, this last week felt better to me with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, than it is to celebrate the joy and renewal of Easter Dawn.

But the sun is shining down on us and we are able to see the faces of those we love. We are together though we are far away.

That's why I chose for this bright day of celebration two sacred readings that are filled with sorrow. I chose them because sometimes the only way out is through. We all know this, though it seems I have to learn this lesson over and over again.

Easter does not come to us all by itself, wrapped in flowers and colored eggs. The shining dawn of Easter day stands upon profound sorrow, and that, my dear friends, is where we must start.

I plunked us a ways into the verses of John 20, because I want to hold up Mary, her sorrow, her revelation. Traditionally, Mary was a fallen woman who Jesus redeemed. But if you are attuned to the recent studies in extracanonical gospels and more contemporary thinking, you know that Jesus was more to Mary than a teacher. And that Mary was more to Jesus than a follower.

To see her outside the tomb is to see her grief of losing the mortal Jesus. This loss, the death of this man, was the loss of her love.

Mary, however, stood crying outside, and in her tears she stooped...

Let's stop there, for a moment. But only a moment. Each of us has stood crying outside and in our tears, stooped... We know that feeling, that deeply intimate feeling of loss and despair.

Which is why I included the Eliot.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.

“East Coker” is the second of Eliot’s profound *Four Quartets*. It is worth noting that it was published in 1940, during World War II, in the Easter edition that year of the *New English Quarterly*.

East Coker is filled with sorrows of the war, and Eliot’s fears that all of his work was inadequate to his times. The world was changing around him, fear and death raged around him as he wrote. Suffering, inner and outer, was everywhere.

When I first read *Four Quartets* as a teenager, I wondered how could dare to tell us to be still and wait without hope. How callous. How inhuman. Yet over the years and accumulation of sorrows and joys in my life, I began to see that how very full the waiting is, the darkness. Faith and love and hope are in the stillness, the waiting. But we can’t always see them. Sometimes, we have to allow the sorrow to consume us. We can’t fly from Montgomery. We can’t escape into a side show, as much as we feel we need to. Eliot seems to say, there is nothing to hold onto.

And yet, when we learn to wait in the dark without clinging to hope, he leads us further into the dark where we can glimpse the edge of hope and love and thought, all there, still: “the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.”

Back to Mary, at the tomb of the dead.

“In her tears she stooped to look into the tomb, and she sees two heavenly messengers in white seated where Jesus’ body had lain...”

The darkness shall be light. Our world is about to turn inside out.

Twice in this short Gospel passage, Mary is asked why she is crying, and twice she says, essentially, this man, who gave my world light, is gone and I cannot find him.

Let’s use our blessed human imaginations to dance into different perspectives. Let us stand in other’s shoes. We are readers and we see Mary at the tomb. But we must also *be* Mary and *feel* her well of sorrow. We must feel her tears as they burn our eyes, as they cloud our vision. We must make the same mistake Mary does when she sees the gardener.

Mary must make that mistake, for the magic to work. By magic, I mean the meaning of this story. It is not the gardener she speaks to, but Jesus. She knows him—he finds him again—when she speaks of her sorrow, when she is mistaken, and when he calls her by her name.

Perhaps it is not a mistake so much as a metaphor. Therein, her story becomes our story, too.

So far in the reading, we might see ourselves in the tears and the sorrow. But for the most part, this part of the Gospel of John is so filled with interpretations of glory and revelation that it seems like something we can’t ever enter into ourselves as people in the 21st century, dealing with disease and the restlessness of our times. It seems we can’t have the same experience finding Jesus just outside the tomb, as Mary did.

Time and distance. Doctrine and theology. I can't bend the laws of physics, nor can I unlearn the literalist lessons of elementary school. I am not one who believes in the bodily resurrection. Yet I know this story has profound message for us. John's gospel was written more than 100 years after the events that took place in it. The people who wrote it were not even born when those events took place. The Gospel beautiful, so richly imagined. But it is not the *history* of the day, but a *vision* of the day. We cannot travel back into history, but we can engage with the metaphors, the symbols, the visions of the day.

Metaphor is a way that we can bring into ourselves the meaning, with depth and breadth and profound spiritual truth. Look again at the passage. Notice that it is written in the present tense. When we read it, it happens now, in our imaginations, that visionary aspect of each of us which contains our ears to hear and our eyes to see.

Mary--in the garden--speaks to the gardener--who calls her by name—and reveals what she has been seeking. Sorrow is illuminated into understanding. The darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.

I think that this year we need to enter into the first person understanding of this story more than we have needed to in a long time. We need to recognize that sorrow and stillness is an invitation, here, in our loneliness. When we accept the invitation to sorrow and stillness, we begin our transformation.

We are apart. But we are also a part of one another. We are being called to a communion together that is unprecedented in its separation. How can it be communion when we can't—in the flesh— see one another, we can't actually touch one another?

It is a communion that is unprecedented in vastness. We are sharing this moment with so many others.

It's not just Berkeley,
It's not just California.
It's not just America (the nation and the dream).

It's the world, our world. We are separated, staying apart. Yet we are united in the action of stillness, together in this act of extreme, deeply human caring.

We are about to enter into our fifth week of separation here in the Bay Area. There are signs that our efforts are working. Even as the curve is flattening, it is lengthening, which is good for our community, our common unity. Even so, every day we hear and experience the pain of loss, the fear of unemployment increasing, the insecurity of how the months ahead will unfold. Here is our darkness.

So, let's see this Easter morning as our visit to the tomb. Weep; it is entirely appropriate. And wait. It is the most generous thing you are doing these days. This caring, loving stillness we freely give to one another today is our lifeline, it is what we can hold on to.

We must fail to see Jesus over and over again before our eyes see clearly and our hearts are illuminated, and we see the Christ throughout all creation.

Scripture:

By T.S. Eliot, from “East Coker” Four Quartets

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.

John 20: 11-18 (trans. Funk and Hoover)

Mary, however, stood crying outside, and in her tears she stooped to look into the tomb, and she sees two heavenly messengers in white seated where Jesus’ body had lain, one at the head and the other at the feet.

“Woman, why are you crying?” they ask her.

“They’ve taken my Master away,” she tells them, “and I don’t know where they’ve put him.”

No Sooner had she said this than she turned around and sees Jesus standing there—but she did not know it was Jesus.

“Woman,” Jesus said to her, “why are you crying? Who is it you’re looking for?”

She could only suppose it was the gardener, and so she says to him, “Please, mister, if you’ve moved him, tell me where you’ve put him so I can take him away.”

Mary,” says Jesus.

She turns around and exclaims in Hebrew, “Rabbi!”