

Resurrections

Lucas Hergert, preaching
Easter, April 12, 2009
First Parish in Needham

Reading: The Gospel According to John, 1-10

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. **2**So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" **3**So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4**Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5**He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6**Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7**as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. **8**Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **10**Then the disciples went back to their homes.

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The author Adam Zagajewski wrote a poem called "Try to Praise the Mutilated World." I would like to begin this Easter morning by reading that poem:

Try to praise the mutilated world.

Remember June's long days,

and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.

The nettles that methodically overgrow

the abandoned homesteads of exiles.

You must praise the mutilated world.

You watched the stylish yachts and ships;

one of them had a long trip ahead of it,

while salty oblivion awaited others.

You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,

you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.

You should praise the mutilated world.

Remember the moments when we were together

in a white room and the curtain fluttered.

Return in thought to the concert where music flared.

You gathered acorns in the park in autumn

and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.

Praise the mutilated world

and the grey feather a thrush lost,

and the gentle light that strays and vanishes

and returns.

What does it mean to try to praise a mutilated world? In some ways it sounds ignorant or naïve, doesn't it? Praising a world that has in it a ship of refugees heading nowhere. Loving a world where the two options are the long journey ahead of us or salty oblivion beneath us. Being joyful even in the presence of the executioner's song. That sort of thing sounds silly, if not brazen and insensitive. To say that there is an obstacle to our praise, to our joy, to our love, is an understatement.

There is a skit on Saturday Night Live that I always perk up for. It is called “Debbie Downer.” Have any of you seen this? Well, in this skit, there are usually a few people sitting around a table. Often, they are trying to have a friendly conversation, or someone will be telling a story about a very pleasant thing that has happened to her. “I just got a promotion!” one of Debbie’s friends will announce. Debbie, with unfailing predictability, will announce the most inappropriate “downer” at that exact moment. “Did you know that one in four cats will die from a treatable disease?” she asks. Another person will then start talking about how beautiful the spring weather is. “Last spring,” Debbie begins, “Hurricane Jean killed at least twenty people. I wonder if there will be another hurricane like that one.”

The reason this skit is funny, I think, is because there is so much that makes our joyful moments silly and trivial in comparison to the magnitude of suffering in our world. Putting that side-by-side with the happier moments in life can seem trivial, absurd. Indeed, there are so many reasons not to praise, and not to be joyful. That’s what Debbie Downer wants to point out. Some of these reasons are manufactured, and are reasons not so authentic to our real concerns. Others are urgent and real. They are like stones set up in front of our joy. They are stones that we carry with us, that weigh us down, that become so heavy that they crush us. How can one praise a mutilated world? How can one find joy in or beyond this fragmented and suffering life? That is what I would like to ask, today, this Easter morning.

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Hans Holbein was a sixteenth-century German painter who created a piece called *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. It did something that was unique at the time, which was to depict the corpse of Jesus inside the tomb. Before the resurrection. Before

any stone was rolled away. Many in the church declared the painting sacrilege, blasphemous. They could tolerate a living, suffering Christ on the cross and a risen Christ outside of the tomb, but they could not conceive of a dead, rotting Christ. As one churchman put it upon viewing the painting, “some may lose their faith.”

The Holbein painting depicts our mutilated world at its worst. After life is gone, after hope flees, after joy is snuffed out, we are left with the darkness of the tomb. The heaviness of the stone that covers our life, hope, and joy. Who hasn't felt the heaviness of that stone, my friends? Who hasn't drug that stone from one place to the next? Indeed, this is where the Gospel story begins. “On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb...”

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While it was still dark, I awake to an empty bed. From fragmented dreams of what I had lost to the reality of this empty bed, I awake. For nearly seven years I had the same person wake up next to me, every day. Now I wake up alone, and that aloneness covers me like a heavy blanket. Or perhaps like a stone. A stone that is so heavy that I have no idea how I will get out of this bed.

Five days before I wake up on this morning, my husband had fallen on some wet pavement and hit the back of his head on a curb. I have expectations that he will come home after the first day in the hospital. Things fall apart; things get worse. Before I know it, the hospital staff is performing heroic surgeries on him.

And then, only four days after his fall, the doctor sits down with me and tells me that Jason is not ever going to come back to me. I awake with this stone on top of me, trying to ready myself to go back to the hospital where Jason's body is lying. Where

machines are performing every bodily function for him. I am trying to get out of this bed in order to go to the hospital to tell him goodbye, for the last time.

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Alice Walker tells of a young girl in her novel *Meridian*. The little girl is playing outside when she stubs her toe on something. She bends down to look at it, and it is sort of shiny. So she starts digging. She discovers that what she has found is a bar of solid gold.

She runs into the house and slams the bar of gold down on the counter where her mother is making dinner. "Look mom!" she yells. "I have found gold, we are going to be rich!"

Her mother takes a look at it, and responds: "Honey, get that thing out of here, I am trying to make dinner." Bewildered, the little girl takes her bar of gold outside. Others that she shows it to also ignore her. So she takes the bar of gold and puts it in shoebox and buries it under a tree. She puts a stone over it to mark its place. Every day she comes to dig it up to hold it and look at it. But eventually she begins to forget about it. And finally she begins to act as though she is someone who does not own a bar of solid gold at all.

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Sometimes we become convinced that what is most important to us, that what brings us the most joy in our lives, is not worthy of our attention. We are told to ignore it, to forget about it. We bury it, and put a stone over it. At other times what we love the most, what brings us the most joy in our lives, is wrenched from our hands. Someone or something else buries it, and puts a stone over it.

This is the story of joy in our world. It is so fragile. The things that we love, that are important to us, that give us hope are too quickly dead and buried. This is where Mary Magdalene is, walking to the tomb to find the body of her beloved teacher. Joy has been wrenched from her hands. Love has been wrenched from her hands. She walks in the dark to the tomb where her hope is buried beneath a heavy stone.

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The stone seemed heavier each time that I touched it. The grief has settled inside me like an unmovable rock. I approached it in the afternoon, in the evening, in the late night. Each time immovable, painful, incommunicable. Most often, though, I touched it in the early morning. The empty place where my husband used to lie. I pushed this rock that I knew wouldn't move, that I thought would always be there.

I awake one morning, reaching for the rock that was always there, next to me. I breathe in, something is wrong. Something inside stirs, changes. I try to breathe, but something is...

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Missing. Mary Magdalene tries to breathe in the dark hours of the morning. Something is missing. This is the place, right? Of course it is, this is the place where she buried the one that she loved the most. This is the place where she buried her hope, the source of her joy, her love. This is where her dreams were extinguished. This *is* the place, it has to be. And yet, something is missing. The stone...

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Has been rolled away. I don't know when or how it happened. I can't remember whether it was sudden or whether it took a long time and I just did not notice it. But the stone has been rolled away. The monument to my grief, the thing that I used to think

about constantly is just not there. I search for it. There is sadness there, a place for my tears. But the stone is gone. It has been rolled away. And in its place, a sense, a hint, a possibility ... of joy.

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It took me a long time to get to the good news of Easter this morning. That's because I think it does take a long time to get to the good news of Easter. It is not as easy as the colorful eggs and happy celebrations suggest. Rather, the story of Easter takes us to the depths of all that can be broken in this world, all that can be mutilated, lost, and destroyed. And then it says: Yes, the resurrection can happen even here. That stone can be moved. That stone can be moved.

This is what it means to try to praise a mutilated world. Even in the hardest times in our lives, even in the most difficult struggles, joy can just break through. Joy is like grace, it just happens. It captures us, holds us, and carries us in the face of all that has been lost. I want to celebrate that today, because is, I think, the message of Easter. Joy can prevail. I believe that to the depths of my being because I have experienced it, seen it, touched it. I have tasted it and heard it. Joy is so easily lost, hidden, destroyed. And yet, just as easily, joy can roll away the stone when we least expect it. This is beautiful. It makes us want to . . . praise. To try to give praise to a mutilated world.

If you are not there yet, I mourn with you. If you have made it there, to the place of joy, I want to celebrate with you. It is so precious. It truly is worth celebrating.

And so I end today with a passage from the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is past;

The rain is over and gone;

The flowers appear on the earth;

The time of the singing of birds is come,

And the voice of the dove is heard in our land;

The fig-tree offers her green figs,

And the vines are in blossom;

They give forth their fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away...

Come away. Amen.