

Easter 1C
Peace, Seattle
April 21, 2019
Luke 24:1-12, Isaiah 65:17-25

FROM IDLE TALE TO HOLY MYSTERY

They'd come to anoint his body, acting out their devotion in the only way that remained for them now.

The women who trekked to the tomb in the half-dark that morning had accompanied Jesus all the way from Galilee. They'd witnessed his healings, heard his teaching, shared in his ministry. And in his presence they'd been transformed.

No longer were they SIMPLY mothers, sisters, daughters—women expected to perform the range of duties assigned to them by culture and gender. They had become—in his eyes and their own—DISCIPLES; PARTICIPANTS in a movement ignited by Jesus' gift for transforming lives.

Compelled by this experience, they'd joined with others on the journey to Jerusalem—and what a remarkable journey it had been!

But on Friday, that journey had come to a screeching halt; for he had been crucified.

On the cusp of Sabbath there was no time to care for his body as they should. They had to wait. And now, on the first day of the week, with Sabbath over and a hint of light in the sky, they walked toward the tomb to give him a proper burial.

In her book THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING, written in the aftermath of her husband's sudden death, Joan Didion describes what she calls THE VORTEX EFFECT.

The VORTEX EFFECT is when some cue or experience in the present moment trips a switch that sweeps her onto the unbidden territory of past memories, dredging up in its wake not only poignant shared moments, but old arguments, too. And regrets.

If she is to survive this sudden, unfathomable loss, then she must steel herself against those memories; she must avoid THE VORTEX EFFECT at all costs.

If you have lost someone dear, if you have witnessed something drear, you know what Didion is talking about.

And you can imagine, too, the tactic of these women on their way to the tomb; how they kept their talk focused on the practical tasks at hand, lest they be swept into the VORTEX.

After the fire that took place in Paris last week, all of France, it seems, is struggling to avoid the Vortex Effect. There's not a place you can go but that you encounter sadness and sorrow — "tristesse" they call it—in the wake of the fire that turned her greatest cathedral, Notre Dame, into a flaming husk.¹

Prior to last Monday, a constant daily throng of pilgrims threaded their way through Notre Dame.

¹See the article in USA TODAY, by Joel Drayfuss. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/04/16/notre-dame-cathedral-paris-fire-history-macron-column/3482618002/>

Now they are relegated to staring at the embattled gothic shell from the outside as they contemplate what has been lost, and wonder whether the Great Lady will rise from her ashes once more.

“The damage to such an important symbol,” wrote one journalist, “resonates especially now because France, like much of Europe, is in a contentious struggle over its identity.”

He goes on... “At a time when so much of modern life seems so precarious, the longevity of Notre Dame offered Parisians an image of permanence.”²

In a world preoccupied with complex challenges like immigration policy, rising nationalism, climate breakdown, the affordability of housing, and the accessibility of healthcare, nostalgia runs high, and nothing of the glorious past is more visible than grand old structures like Notre Dame.³

“There is grief work to be done in the present that the future may come,” writes Walter Brueggemann. “Mourning,” he says, “is a precondition” that must be met. For “those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy.”⁴

But while today’s story from Luke begins in a joyless graveyard with the expectation that the women will tend a lifeless husk, what unfolds next **SHIFTS THAT NARRATIVE.**

**For when they arrive at the tomb, nothing is as expected.
The stone has been rolled away. His body is gone!**

Yet before they can begin to sort out their perplexion, terror takes over as two strangers suddenly appear—and there’s no way to know who they are or what they have to do with the disappeared body.

**WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? they ask the women.
HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN!**

Christians have struggled long and mightily to grasp what took place that morning.

These women, first witnesses of the resurrection, when they went to share their experience with their male counterparts, found their story dismissed outright as an IDLE TALE...

De-legitimizing the voices of women is an old story.

How do you acquire the mental bandwidth to comprehend a mystery for which there is no precedent?

In the end, the men came around to YES, OUR SISTERS WERE RIGHT! But beyond their circle all they could do (all any of us can do) is point to their experience of the risen Christ among them – journeying beside them, sustaining them, forming them into a community no longer fearful, into a people ready—eager—to go public with what they had heard and seen.

Only in hindsight can we see something as a true tipping point in the course of events, and for those who are apprenticed to Jesus, who’ve waded into baptismal waters, the Empty Tomb is it.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

Those who've studied the long history of Notre Dame know that what happened last week is not the first time the Cathedral of Our Lady has come close to suffering an ignoble death.

In the centuries after its completion, Notre Dame served as the Cathedral Church—the Establishment church—for European royalty, and its identity was indelibly linked with the royals, the church hierarchy, and the aristocracy. And in the years leading up to the French Revolution Notre Dame had come to symbolize the excesses of all three.

With the success of the revolution, the Cathedral of Notre Dame was at risk.

- Religious services were banned,
- It was stripped of all its riches,
- Statues were pulled down, and masons systematically chiseled off anything that seemed kingly.
- Notre-Dame was converted into a "Temple of Reason" and even became, for a while, a holding pen for cattle.

Because it had become such a negative icon of privilege and excess, there were many who thought it ought to be torn down—so far had it strayed far from Christ's fundamental mission of serving all people.

But not everyone thought tearing down Notre Dame was the solution.

One man thought that if he could somehow make Parisians fall in love with the great Cathedral again, then it might be saved and its role renewed. So he wrote a story about a deeply flawed human being who found sanctuary and purpose there. He called it THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME.

That novel by Victor Hugo reset the narrative, and calls for tearing the cathedral down were transmuted into calls for its restoration.

In the wake of last week's fire, many people have been jockeying to provide the resources for rebuilding Notre Dame's structure.

But what of the building's faith foundations? And what, on this Easter Day, of ours?

God's dream for humanity is not bound to brick and mortar—no matter how grand or ennobling the architecture may be.

God's vision would not have us dwelling in the past—instead it beckons us to the future.

LOOK, says the Lord through the prophet,
I AM ABOUT TO CREATE NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH...
BE GLAD AND REJOICE FOREVER IN WHAT I AM CREATING!

A church that summons its energies merely for the purpose of reincarnating its past, is like someone who returns to the graveyard again and again hoping the corpse will show up.

Do you want to be party of that kind of narrative? Neither do I.

The truth of the EMPTY tomb, the reality that we are bound not to a dead Jesus but to a RISEN Lord, means that your future, mine, and ours is an OPEN FUTURE; one GOD CAN BE TRUSTED to bring it to completion.

In light of this, our primary job as Christians and as human beings isn't about erecting roofs or walls but becoming a servant community. WHY? Because that's who the Risen Lord calls us to be.

On the day our family visited Notre Dame, the narrative of the Cathedral that Victor Hugo helped to RESET was very much present to us.

But what became, for me, even more compelling than what I saw INSIDE the Cathedral was what was taking place OUTSIDE.

Across the Place du Parvis—the epicenter of ancient Paris and the location from which all distances in the city are measured—a tent the length of a city block had been erected with bread and pastry makers from throughout the region marketing their wares inside.

Exiting the Cathedral, we were met by a woman with a basket full of baguettes going amongst the crowd, offering up pieces of freshly cut bread to any and all who would take them. Circling around and around the Place du Parvis, with a smile on her face and a lilt in her walk, she gave away bread indiscriminately.

I tell you friends, is this not a metaphor for the mission of the body of Christ?

When we take in the Bread of Life at this Table today, we exchange the narratives that keep us bound for the narrative that sets us free; and with a lilt in our step, we become what we eat: the Body of Christ, sharing the joy of the Risen Christ indiscriminately—as food for a hungry world.

“**HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN**” sounded like crazy talk to the men who heard it on the women's lips, and they dismissed it as an “idle tale.” But when they heard his voice, saw his wounds, and shared the bread, that IDLE TALE became a HOLY MYSTERY.

However it is that we find ourselves here this morning, whatever vortex we may be running from, we come needing to know that the God who raised Jesus can raise us up, too; that our past does not determine our future.

Putting our trust in this reality will make resurrection real for us on this side of the grave as well as the other.

For Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Alleluia! Amen.

Rise for the blessing... May the peace of God...