

## "Resurrection--Mystery"

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

Date: April 20, 2014

13:11

There's a story about three friends who one day discussed what they wanted their funerals to be like, what did they really want people to say about them at the service when folks were reflecting on their lives. The first said, "I would want people to say that I was a great humanitarian, and gave myself selflessly to the community." The second friend said, "I would want people to say that I was a wonderful mother, wife, and friend, an example for others to follow." The third friend thought for awhile and said, "Well I would want people to say--look, he's moving!"

Death is not easy to deal with—thinking about our own ends and the ends of the ones we love most is hard. So many times in this holiest week we heard that the disciples were grieved. Peter went out and wept bitter tears after he denied Jesus three times. Even Judas was not immune to the pain of betrayal and death in the end. But all was not lost for these earliest believers. All is not lost for you and me. Hope is not lost. Love is not lost. And death did not have the final say in God's story. Death doesn't even have the final say in our stories. This is the hope of Easter. This is the hope of Resurrection.

On Easter Sunday in the Christian faith we hear this stunningly beautiful story of love having the last word. New life and mystery is present here. Public Theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber likes to think that Mary Magdalene never lived discovering the empty tomb and mistaking Jesus for the Gardener down. That years later, her friends would say to her, "Mary, do you remember when you totally thought that Jesus was the Gardener? And you were all like, 'Hey buddy, tell me where you put him if you carried him off.' Hilarious." And Mary would get all sullen, "Stop it you guys, at least I was there, okay? It's not that funny anymore!" But it really is funny and touching and moving and just so human.

We tend to feel uncomfortable or confused when we contemplate Jesus' death and Resurrection. We want to explain it away or at least explain it enough that we can feel secure. But this is one of those holy days in the church year when I want to turn to the last person who came into this sanctuary this morning and say, Oh, you thought I have all the answers? Because I was really hoping YOU had some!

My answer to the question and the spiritual struggle of what the Resurrection of Jesus Christ really was and means today is for all of us to just settle in and get good and comfortable with mystery. To get comfortable with not knowing exactly what happened that first Easter morning when Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple came to that empty tomb and discovered something miraculous and intellectually unknowable. We thought he was dead, done, gone forever--but Jesus lives. How do you explain that?

Humanity had an explosion of discovery and exploration not so long ago in the span of human history--you know, the Enlightenment that moved us forward with how we understand the world around us. Reason and logic and of course the Scientific Method tend to rule the day these days and all other ways of knowing got sidelined. Yet there are other ways of knowing than just using our intellects, vast and impressive though they may be. Explain to me scientifically why a particular song makes you cry. Tell me why you fell deeply in love with someone. But don't go getting all emotional on me or speak about experiences, just tell me the facts, if you please. Prove to me that when you see the stars shining above or hear the ocean roar, that you feel connected to the universe somehow and part of something so much bigger than little old you. But tell me logically with evidence to back up your claim, otherwise I won't

believe that what you say is real or true. There are other ways of knowing, my friends, than just using our intellects, logic, provable facts, and providing evidence of our claims. Faith is gray, it's not black and white.

Here's a modern example. Rob Bell tells a story in his book *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* about a woman he met after a speaking engagement in Boston who told him that she had been in the hospital for ongoing cancer treatment. She was lying there in bed and thought that she wasn't going to make it, feeling lower than she had ever felt before. She was filled with despair and wondered if she would die soon. Then a night-shift nurse came into her room and began to lovingly care for her, returning repeatedly throughout the night and calming her, reassuring her, and speaking to her in a way that "lifted her entire being and gave her hope."

In the morning, the woman woke up feeling like a new person and she asked the morning nurse for the name of the nurse who had taken such special care of her during the night, the name of that nurse who didn't abandon her in her darkest hour. The morning nurse was baffled and said that no one fitting that description worked on the floor of that hospital. No one fitting that description could have possibly been in the woman's room caring for her all night long.

What do we do with a story like that? We can try for some logical explanations--she was dreaming, loopy from the medicine, having hallucinations due to fear or lack of sleep, but they tend to all ring hollow after awhile. Rob Bell and most clergy, well, we hear countless stories like this one. Bell affirms that he hears these stories from religious people who carry around big, worn Bibles with their names engraved on the front cover and from what he terms "educated, somewhat cynical people with PhDs who own companies and have expertise in fields so technical I barely understand what it is they do all day."

Let's be intellectually honest when it comes to faith. Let's be open-minded and open-hearted enough to admit that some phenomena have no rational explanations. There is mystery present in our world and in our lives and perhaps we shouldn't always try to explain that mystery away. Maybe we sit with that mystery. We contemplate that mystery. And we learn to embrace the mysteries of life and faith.

The wisdom of Progressive Christianity, our form of Christianity in the United Church of Christ, teaches us to embrace mystery. That when we leave room for spiritual uncertainty, we discover what mystics have always known in every religion, that ambiguity and uncertainty is not something to be feared, but welcomed as a vital part of any spirituality that continues to grow and evolve. That the persistent search for God can produce an authentic relationship with God. For "the truly holy is not something grasped in the intellectual realm, but firmly rooted in the experiential." To know God, to truly know God, is to experience the presence of God in our lives. Christ is Risen!

When Mary Magdalene wept outside the tomb of her teacher and beloved friend, she didn't intellectually grasp that Jesus was somehow, in some manner truly with her at first. That's why she mistakes him for the Gardener and her friends may have teased her about it for the rest of her life. It makes no logical sense that Jesus is still present, not after the pain of that dark Friday just days before. The intellectual and theological understanding of the Resurrection came in time for the disciples and for Christians today, the knowledge that God somehow thwarted death and love won in the end.

The scales fall from her eyes when she hears Jesus call her name, "Mary!" She experiences in that moment how she must have felt walking by his side during their time together. Jesus told the disciples throughout his ministry, "Come and see." Mary came to the tomb and she saw that the stone had been removed. But something felt different, things were not as she expected

them to be. Mary's experience of the holy, of the presence of God she always felt most strongly in the presence of Jesus, is revealed and felt and known when she comes and sees Jesus for who he truly is. Christ is Risen! She goes out and tells the sad and terrified disciples, "I have seen the Lord." The first sermon of this new era, delivered by a woman. She experienced and saw and believed and proclaimed. And Mary is transformed by this experience of the Risen Christ. And we can be too. Christ is Risen Indeed! Amen.

Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*.

David M. Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, 220-221.

John 20:16, NRSV.

John 20:18, NRSV.

Clayton J. Schmit, *Homiletical Perspective of John 20:1-18 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2:Lent through Eastertide*, 375.