

EASTER: NEW LIFE

John 20:1-18

The story of the resurrection is very familiar to many of us. Yet, it is told in the Gospel of John without the perspective of the angels. They are just there. We are told in John 20:12 that Mary “saw two angels in white; sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.” I wonder what they thought about all that had happened. What if we found a journal written by one of the angels? What would it say? How did they experience the resurrection? Well, here is what it could say if we found it. (based on a story by Michael E. Williams in *The Storyteller’s Companion*):

Angel Journal: Day 1

I have just completed my training for the God Express Messenger Service. They gave me my uniform, a white robe, and the special washing instructions for keeping it clean and bright. We learned many helpful things in our classes in addition to robe cleaning. How we’re to greet people was a very important lesson, in order to get off on the right foot. “Hail, O favored one” was my favorite one.

Angel Journal: Day 2

I received my first assignment today. At first, it didn’t sound like the best one on the list. Still, what should I expect when I am just getting started? I am instructed to sit in a tomb waiting for a woman to arrive. When I see the woman, I am supposed to help her understand that her friend is no longer there but is risen. This confused me a bit at first. I assumed right off that her friend Jesus had risen from sleep, but what would he be doing sleeping in a tomb? I started to ask that question, but such inquiries are frowned upon when made by brand-new angels like myself. Then they told me that this Jesus had been crucified, which cleared that up. Sort of. Crucifixion, what a nasty business; what sort of cruelty will these mortals think of next? I’ve never heard of anyone surviving a crucifixion before.

Angel Journal: Day 3

The assignment seemed simple enough, especially that I was going to go with another angel who had more experience. We found the tomb without getting lost and took our seats inside. We allowed ourselves plenty of time, so we arrived early. We waited for a long time. As we waited I tried to get my experienced companion to explain to me the mystery of this resurrection, but he wouldn’t talk. Not even one word to help me understand! Anyway, the woman arrived and looked around. But she was weeping. So, we asked her why she was weeping. She told us, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” As I was gathering my thoughts to try to help her through her tears, Jesus himself appeared and told her about his resurrection. She was so excited when she saw Jesus that she forgot about us, which was a relief. I am glad that he handled all of this himself. I don’t know how I would have explained this to her where she would have really believed me that Jesus was raised from the dead. Humans are hard to communicate with. It is hard to get through to them. They don’t seem to see beyond the ordinary. They often seem to let their fear and pain control them. I am glad that Jesus showed up on the scene, because it does not look good to get a bad report on your first assignment!”

Why do we have a hard time getting the hope of Easter and the promise of new life? Why is it so hard to believe in things that we have not seen and cannot even be proven? I think the angel is right about humans having a hard time believing the gift of new life that extends beyond death. But what our dear angel does not seem to get is that we live here on earth, with real people and real problems. We live in a world that is often filled with pain and suffering. The writer of the Gospel of John understood this well. The writer begins the Easter story with the words, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” Knowing how imagery of light and darkness is very important in the Gospel of John we can know that the Easter message of resurrection, new life and light comes to us especially in times of pain and darkness. While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to a tomb because earlier in the week Jesus had been killed. With him, her hope died.

Earlier this week, after many years of marriage, a couple was separated from each other by death. A spouse is left alone knowing that they will face the rest of their years alone without the love of their life. *Earlier this week*, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company and they had to let her go. She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her kids. *Earlier this week*, someone received terrible news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, "I have never loved you." *Earlier this week*, someone's hope was crucified. *Earlier this week*, we read the terrible news about hunger, disease, poverty, greed and war in our world. *Earlier this week*, we learned that 40 percent of the world's population lacks basic sanitation facilities and over one billion use unsafe water. And the darkness is overwhelming.

One might ask, "Why do we have such a hard time believing in the light and new life of the resurrection?" The answer is all around us and is so easy to see. Our world and our lives are filled with pain, death and suffering. Yet, in the midst of all of the pain of our world, Easter comes. Pastor Craig Barns says, "No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It's about more hope than we can handle... The question that Easter asks of us is not "Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?" Frankly, that's not particularly hard. Our doctrines bend easily to conform to the darkness, and before long our beliefs are reduced to sentimental claims about the spirit of Easter or new beginnings." Or we make the opposite mistake of insisting only on belief in the historicity of this event. It's all just a way of begging the question. What the Gospels ask is not "Do you believe?" but "Have you encountered a risen Christ?"

Mary Magdalene does not leave the grave to tell the other disciples that she believed in the resurrection. Her witness was that of a personal experience of Christ. She said, "I have seen the Lord." Easter is not about the details of the resurrection. In fact, there were no witnesses to what happened in the grave of how Jesus was raised from the dead. Easter is about the encounters the disciples had with Jesus after his resurrection. It is about the gift of new life bursting into the pain and despair of our world.

In 1985 South Africa appeared hopelessly trapped in the grip of apartheid. In 1985, there was no earthly evidence that the powers of apartheid would ever yield. To the world, it appeared hopeless. But Desmond Tutu, who believed in the power of the resurrection, knew that evil had already been defeated. One day a political rally had been cancelled by the government so Bishop Desmond Tutu offered a service inside the Johannesburg cathedral instead. Large numbers of riot police and armed soldiers waited outside, while inside the cathedral more police lined the walls recording everything that was said. The atmosphere was tense. Desmond Tutu declared confidently that the evil system of apartheid could not stand, and he pointed his finger at the police around the walls and said to them: "You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God. And the God whom we serve cannot be mocked. You have already lost." Then he came out of the pulpit with his characteristic, big smile and said, "So, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to come and join the winning side." The whole cathedral erupted in delight, the police left, and the congregation rose up to dance. Nothing can defeat a resurrection faith.

When the Russians went into Czechoslovakia in 1968 to put down the uprising they turned many of the great cathedrals and churches into museums. One university lecturer lost her teaching post and took a job as a cleaner in the cathedral so that the great house of God should continue to be prayed in. For twenty years she prayed this prayer: "Be not afraid. Sing out for joy. Christ is risen. Alleluia." That prayer is now sung by thousands of young people week by week in the unique Christian community at Taize, France.

We can rejoice in Easter's news because while it is still dark, the light of the new life of Christ comes to us. Resurrection was not that day's prospect for Mary Magdalene. The voice of the Risen Jesus calling her name surprises Mary into recognition, then prepares her for surprising witness. Christ is among us. So said Mary, so say those who follow her lead. Easter and the experience of God's love breaking into our life are happening among us today and every day. Christ *is* risen. Alleluia! Amen.