

Easter is Hard

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Luke 24:36-49 ~ April 18, 2021

“Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Bring us your joy, risen Christ. Amen.

I am part of a colleague group made up of eighteen priests leading some of the largest Episcopal churches across the country, from Jacksonville to Seattle; from Houston to Boston. Half are cathedral deans, the rest are parish rectors. Our practice is to meet for four days, once a year, after Easter, with a guest presenter. We met together this week and began as we have with a deep sharing of our lives and ministries – checking in on family, spiritual, physical, vocational, and professional well-being.

To a one, these are churches that, like St. Columba’s, have had the vitality and resources to adapt creatively to the challenges of the past year, and have shown resilience and health. To a one, these church leaders shared stories of weariness, hardship, exhaustion. To a one, we share the perception that many of the church’s customary patterns of gathering and serving have not only been disrupted; we have been forever changed – in ways we cannot yet know and may only imagine. To a one, we put our trust in God and are choosing to live with hope and joy.

Our presenter and guide was Serene Jones. Formerly professor of systematic theology at Yale Divinity School, Dr. Jones is now president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Importantly for our purposes, Serene is the author of Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World – and more than any other theologian has explored how our scriptures may speak and our church communities may support those experiencing trauma.

Once you begin to look through this lens, you can see that the Bible is one long tale of God’s people undergoing and navigating traumatic or harrowing experiences. Foremost among these is the crucifixion in all its overwhelming, seemingly senseless brutality, and the resurrection in all its mysterious expression of new life. I’d like to offer today’s gospel as a lens and framework for considering our collective experience of the past year or so, and the prospect of resurrection in the seasons ahead – for the church, and for our lives.

When asked, “how many points should a good sermon make?” my homiletics professor responded dryly, “at least one.” With a whole swirl of different pieces to share with you, the one point I will make is that the resurrection is confusing, and that for all the joy that may come with it there is grief. It is not often proclaimed but Easter is hard. There is no one way to experience it, or apprehend and make sense of it; there is no one way to proceed in the company of the risen, resurrected Christ.

So, let me do three things to get us started: name our context, define trauma, and look at the Gospel. Then, we’ll go from there.

Context: a year of pandemic, forced to physically separate ourselves from those we long to embrace, personally and collectively grieving nearly 600,000 deaths in this country and nearly 3,000,000 souls worldwide. The sin and violence of racism boils over with new poignancy, as some spew vitriol and others come to understand systemic infrastructures – all amid continual murder – as recently as Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo – as of this recording. (Pray God, there is not another murder between my speaking and your hearing, though the track record is not

promising). The fragility of our planet, the economic disparity between rich and poor – and the questions about what we’re going to do about these.

I rejoice in our capacity to rejoice – in springtime and fine weather, in little reunions occurring, in love and laughter. But, my God, it’s been a rough year.

I have no expertise in trauma and cannot do justice to the topic but I think it helpful to name a few characteristics. The word comes from the Greek and means “a wound” or “an injury inflicted upon the body by an act of violence.” Bessel van der Kolk – the grandfather in the field of trauma study – writes, “A traumatic event is one in which a person or persons perceives themselves or others as threatened by an external force that seeks to annihilate them and against which they are unable to resist and which overwhelms their capacity to cope.”

To unpack this just a bit. Traumatic events are distinguished by order of magnitude; this is not any wound or any loss; one experiences the threat of annihilation. The capacity to cope is overwhelmed; so the things we know to do to take care of our ourselves, or the ways we’ve made sense of things... these are overwhelmed. Thus, there is a real breakdown in our capacity to make sense, to know, and to feel – leading to a loss of agency; we can feel helpless. Trauma is usually grounded in a real event, but one’s memory of it may be unstable; debating the “facts” is rarely helpful or even illuminating. Trauma doesn’t have to happen to us directly; it can be what’s known as secondary trauma, we may be witnesses. Think of watching the collapse of the World Trade Center, or of the experience of healthcare workers and nurses in hospitals today. Traumatic events can occur to individuals and to entire communities, or nations.

Serene suggested we considered the frontal lobes of our brain as resembling the circulation desk in a library. A continual stream of material is presented – some of little importance, some of great magnitude. At that desk, all of it is sorted, filed, and shelved according to some system. Traumatic events bypass and leap over the desk. Thus, it is not shelved in any predictable place; rather it roams and can return unexpectedly, for example as a nightmare. And it reeks havoc with our memory because we didn’t place it anywhere. It’s not like the thing we put in a drawer and, if only we retrace our steps, we can retrieve it. We don’t have a way of tracking it down, finding and making sense of it in our own being.

Serene offered three steps or pre-conditions that may lead to some healing. Healing in this context is not “getting over it”; rather, it is developing capacity to bear it. She spoke first, of the importance of having a person or community with whom one experiences safety and trust. Second, the story needs to come pouring out, may be vomited out; the story brought back to the circulation desk. Third, the story needs to be integrated with, framed within, an other story – of ordinary life, or some story that offers a way to latch on and reattach meaning. Serene was also quick to say that the field of trauma study is developing significantly and that much of the current work suggests that any healing can occur only through our bodies. It is our bodies that bear the wounds; it is in and through our bodies that we may come to any semblance of healing.

Now to the Gospel. We are just days since the tomb was found empty and a handful of the disciples saw the risen Christ. Christ comes now and stands among them. We are told that the disciples were “startled, terrified, thought they were seeing a ghost.” Jesus asks about their fright – names it, and their doubt. It says, in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering. Startled, terrified, joy, doubt, wondering – what an emotional mash-up. They don’t have

categories or framework for what they are experiencing. So, Jesus ate a piece of fish – as if to say, see, ghosts don't eat fish. What!?!

Then he tells some stories. Opens their minds, it says, to give them some context, offer a hook or two they might be able to grab onto in the swirl. Even in the midst of this, he tells them that it's important going forward that they talk about this. About what? About who and what they've witnessed, what they've experienced – the terror and doubt, the joy in the midst of disbelieving. And then, as if acknowledging that it's all too soon, that they're still immobile in shock, Jesus says, just stay here; “stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” – which we know will be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them. At which point – and not until that point – will they venture forth, and venture forth with unexpected life and vibrancy. Easter is hard.

The disciples do not recognize Jesus. Either the resurrected Christ does not look like the living Jesus whom they knew before. Or the disciples are so disoriented they cannot even see the person standing before them for who he is. I believe Jesus is not the same as he was. We do not proclaim Jesus being resuscitated; we thought he was a goner, but he's back. We proclaim resurrection: he died, and is alive anew. When we grieve someone's death, we don't get over it. We are forever changed. We may experience them still with us, but not as they were. We still live, but now with the loss. The risen Jesus bears the wounds, the scars of his death – where the thorns pierced his brow, the sword his side, the nails pierced his hands. Those who experience trauma don't get over it; it is forever a part of them. It may be crippling and it may ultimately be a source of strength or grace – and may be all of these together.

Since the earliest of days, we have understood the church to be the body of Christ; we are – you and I collectively, across time – that body. I could tell you that, after all we've gone through, I think the church, the body of Christ today, is going to look different in the future. There are aspects we may not recognize, aspects we may have lost and shall grieve; and aspects that may embolden us for something new and inspiring. I believe this to be so. Grief, joy, doubt, and bewilderment, all rolled into one. I believe similar changes are occurring across every facet of our life – in our families, our places of work, our schools, cities, and nations. Maybe you see parallels in your life.

In the seasons ahead, I would like to believe that the church is one of the places in our lives where we will be able to help one another find healing and hope. For, at our best, we offer a circle of safety and trust. On a good day, we may find fellow sojourners, those with a pastoral heart with whom we can spill and spew the stories of our experiences. And at the core of our being, the church is a community of people who gather to frame and reframe the narrative of our own lives within a God-shaped narrative – of love received, love embodied, among woundedness, with the scars for all to see.

In the seasons ahead, I don't know what the church will look like. I wonder: when it is safe, will we all come racing back to be together in a great joyful throng? Will we opt – at least sometimes – to join from our backyard or living room – because this has been working? And what of you who are now a vital part of St Columba's and who live in upstate New York or on the West Coast? Hi! (Wave) In this new body, how will we live into our commitment to partner with those who differ from us, to address homelessness in the city? How will we embody and

make real the healing and hope for which we long – for ourselves, for our neighbors, for this fragile earth, for our children?

Your vestry, staff, and I will be gathering and wondering together. I expect we will experience a mash-up of feelings: of fright and doubt, joy and wonder. Even though we cannot yet recognize the risen body, we may nonetheless believe and trust that God is bringing about a new creation; a new church, new body is being formed. If the resurrection reveals anything, it is that what we are now experiencing as death – and truly is death – shall not lead to death forever. Rather, it shall lead to new life. Just different. For those of us who are disciples today, being faithful in this hour means staying together, here in the city, trusting in the presence of the risen Christ, who is standing right here, right in our very midst.

The Christ is among us. “Peace be with you,” says he. Then he says, ‘Let me tell you once again what is written – in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and the psalms; how the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me and see. You are witnesses of these things.

Happy Easter. Happy hard Easter. Amen.