

Easter: The Eyes of Faith – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20: 1-18

Trying to make sense of the Easter faith has become something of a cottage industry—witness the recent publication of Diarmaid MacCulloch's new tome, *Christianity: The First 3000 Years*. At something just short of 1200 pages and weighing in at over four pounds, Sarah Bryan Miller writing in this morning's *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* sees it as a timely advertisement for nothing less than the recently-released Mac I-Pad. A curate's son, Diarmaid is a prodigious scholar who occupies a prestigious chair at Oxford, yet feels uncomfortable describing himself as a believer but, instead, opts to call himself a "friend of the faith." Whenever Dr. MacCulloch speaks of Christianity, he, like much of the academic world prefers to label himself more fond observer than active participant. In this respect, he is clearly the inheritor of an Oxbridge tradition that extends back at least to World War I when the future dons, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, were thrown into one of humanity's greatest killing machines.

I have always been struck by Lewis' testimony that his conversion to the Christian faith was impeded merely by his own lack of imagination. He had pushed reason to the limits, but yet remained something of a skeptic. It was only through a famous conversation held one starry night with his fellow veteran, colleague, and drinking companion, the quiet philologist Tolkien, that Lewis was able to begin to accept the narrative concerning a God whose dying could transform all those who believe in him. It was, claimed Tolkien in his official biography by Humphrey Carpenter, "the truest of myths," an outlandish story come to life in Jesus of Nazareth. And because of its almost fantastic nature, both men reverted to telling the story through the eyes of children, fauns, and hobbits.

Lewis chose to enter the imagination of young Lucy whose rather playful antics in a wardrobe transported her and her siblings into the realm of a strange, new reality—none other than the magical land of Narnia. In Narnia, there are kingdoms, creatures, and all sorts of adventures bigger than life where, though difficulties transpire, there exists yet the wise and gentle lion, Aslan, Lewis' Christ figure, who protects and rescues the children. Through these wonderful stories, Lewis gives one the sense of both the majesty and the wonder of today's gospel narrative, the ultimate good news writ large in capital letters. It strains the imagination and tugs at our credulity. In fact, in St. Luke's gospel, the disciples are described as listening in utter disbelief, openly scoffing at these emotional, irrational women, in the end branding their report nothing more than "an idle tale."

St. Paul, in his own probing testimony to the resurrection penned for the church at Corinth, abandons his legal brief, departing from stale, arid logic and breaks into rhapsodic poetry: "Lo!" he says, "I tell you a musterion (a mystery)." His assertion of resurrection faith cannot be subjected to empirical proof, yet this enigma of God raising from the dead the Nazarene prophet

is the apostle-to-the-Gentiles ultimate peroration as he brazenly asserts, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied,” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14, 19).

Like Lewis, like those first disciples, this morning we long to come to the tomb and to peer in—to have a look for ourselves and to determine whether to be fond observer or awe-struck participant. Reason abandons us as we stand before this ineluctable mystery. We stand before the graves of our loved ones, some of you perhaps even this past year, and we are tempted to claw the soft sod beneath which we have laid them. We stifle our cries of lament hoping, longing for a reasonable explanation of death, and yet none comes. The mystery remains. We find ourselves tired, worn out, and sick of reasoning. Reason has transported us to the lip of the grave and there left us, like our loved ones, for dead.

This day, however, from Nairobi to Nome, from London to Lima, from Grenoble to Greenville, the people of God, the living body of Christ, stand trembling upon sacred turf, not to argue from logic or to hold up an artifact that somehow might prove the resurrection story true. No, Christians come together on this glorious day merely to tell a tale almost too fantastic to believe. We come not to offer a logical proof. We come not to preach damnation or destruction. We come simply to tell a story, a very simple story. We have no photographs of a risen Christ floating through the clouds of a hurricane like some apparition appearing in a moment of maximum terror. We come not armed with evangelistic leaflets or an infallible shroud, for trinkets and artifacts from or about an empty tomb are not the substance of our faith. We come, though, to listen once again, like little children, to the Story with a capital “S”, that interprets all our stories.

And what does this story have to say to us? In this morning’s gospel lesson from John, we see three very different characters come to the tomb and react in three very different ways. This is not so unusual. Times of crisis, such as that which many of our brothers and sisters in Haiti are living through this season, have a way of helping us understand what motivates us and what we really believe. As a minister of the gospel, I have stood beside men and women who appear to be the strongest of the strong and watched them paralyzed or completely out of control when confronted with a difficult situation. In like manner, I have observed, at times, those considered weak and frail, people we would normally think would be the first to fall apart, show amazing strength and resolution when placed in a similar set of circumstances. Yet, John’s story not only suggests to us that different people can encounter the same situation and yet act quite differently. It also insinuates, I believe, that **God brings people to resurrection life in quite different ways.**

The story opens with Mary Magdalene, one about whom we have so little information. In Luke’s gospel, it is suggested that she was the one out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons. According to tradition, her life had been literally reclaimed from the dregs of sin and degradation. In the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar, she is the one who sings, “I don’t know

how to love him!” And, like many who have found new life in Christ, Mary’s story was perhaps one of a dramatic healing and conversion. She who had sinned much, also, perhaps, came to love much, and the story hints that she is on her way to the tomb on an errand of love as soon as the rosy-fingered dawn will allow her. Yet, what she discovers shocks and amazes her. She stands incredulous before the heavy stone that normally would have blocked her entrance, somehow, unbelievably rolled to the side. You can almost feel the tingling in her spine as she stands there and attempts to take it all in. This gospel does not attempt to tell us what she felt, though St. Mark portrays the women fleeing in terror and amazement. What we do know is that she ran. Now, I don’t know what kind of shape this woman was in. However, I do suspect that she ran for all that she was worth, heading in the direction of her friends and all that was familiar.

When you think of it, it is somewhat amazing that Peter was still acknowledged as the leader of the apostles. When last we had seen him in John’s gospel, he had stood witness to his own thrice-fold denial of his Lord and Master. And yet, here he is, once again, swallowing his pride and meeting with the others. In short gasps, Mary blurts out what she has seen. Not to be taken in, Peter and the Beloved Disciple set off a fast trot to try and discover what could possibly have driven the poor woman out of her mind. Tradition has it that Peter’s companion was John, certainly the younger and perhaps even the stronger, who soon outstripped his older companion and went up to the tomb and looked in. He, too, could well have been quite frightened, for the narrative suggests that although he looked in, he made no move to enter. Not so, though, with bold braggadocio Peter, the “Rock.” He barges right in and discovers an empty tomb with only the grave clothes left behind. What is distinctive is the fact that the story suggests that the clothes that bound Jesus were left undisturbed. They looked as if they had not been removed at all, but simply left lying where the corpse had been—except for the head wrappings, that is.

How can we possibly reconstruct what must have gone through their troubled minds? It is impossible. The gospel writer makes no such attempt to play psychoanalyst. Yet the narrative is told in such a way that it is almost as if we are there observing their every move and catching some hint of their mental processes. The difference, though, is in their reactions. Bold, brash Peter will have to wait until the next chapter before he can be convinced of the resurrection and reconciled to his Lord. But, it is said, that the Beloved Disciple believed at that very moment. The younger man is brought to faith through what he sees. Yet, Peter is not. In this story, only the Beloved Disciple is shown to have “the eyes of faith.”

And, just as there are many whose stories are similar to Mary’s, there are many who come to faith like John. It is not Jesus they want to see, it is some evidence that he has left behind. For such, the resurrection is a means of validating his authority. Mind you, it is not irrefutable proof. The mere fact that the grave clothes were lying there is not enough to force the conclusion that he must have arisen. But, they are enough to move some, those like Lewis’ Lucy, who have the eyes of faith. These are those who, unlike Lewis, have lively imaginations in the first place. Their capacity for faith is enormous and they have this childlike ability to embrace the story as

story, as good news, without the need for explanation. The sense of mystery and paradox only serve to heighten their joy.

The disciples then leave the scene. But, the Scriptures suggest, Mary stays behind. Frantic and frustrated, her broken heart now shattered, she is at a loss what to do next. The one who loved her uniquely, the one who set her free, who supported and affirmed her, who gave meaning to her life, had been brutally torn from her and, apparently, his body had been stolen. And so, she does what we so often do when faced with tragedy and anger—she begins to cry. This is probably not an ordinary cry, but a real-life break-down-and-sob-your-heart-out wailing and weeping. Her world has come undone and she feels so alone, so desolate. In her despair and grief, she then stoops to look inside the tomb and has something of a vision. According to the rather apocalyptic-laden imagery, she is confronted by two angels. Yet, it makes no difference. She simply cannot stop crying. “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. “Because,” she exclaims, “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” It is the heart-cry of children in Haiti and other third-world countries today whose voices resonate with that self-same answer. Confronted with loss, misery, and indescribable pain and death, their voices are caught up with Mary’s this morning.

Where, I ask you, is Jesus for the thousands of women throughout the world whose husbands have been murdered by repressive governments? Where is Jesus for children who are starving in Africa and Asia this morning? Where is Jesus when that young man or woman walks into a café or motel and blows to smithereens their parents’ hopes and dreams, along with countless innocent men, women, and children? Where is Jesus? Would it not make much more sense today that people in bondage and pain would cry out with Mary? Or, have our hearts become so cauterized by our damnable pursuit of pleasure and possessions at the expense of hurting and marginalized people that we can’t even hear their cries any more?

Mary turns and sees Jesus standing, but she doesn’t know yet that it is he. He simply asks, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Notice that he doesn’t tell her to dry her tears and to buck up, to put on a stiff upper lip. He simply asks her why she is crying. He invites her to give voice to the name behind her pain. Maybe if she can put her finger on the depth of her hurt there can yet be healing. “Sir,” she replies, “if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Mary hopes beyond hope simply to be able to live, perhaps to caress once more, the crucified man, the punctured body of the one to whom she owes her all. And then it happens. The story-teller simply has Jesus pronounce her name. There is something of a pregnant pause while this tear-stained woman turns and calls him by the familiar, “Rabbouni,” teacher.

Note here that it is not physical evidence that brings this woman to faith—it is a spoken word. It is nothing more, nor nothing less, than her name. Mary is not concerned about the logical evidence and the exact position of the grave clothes. In fact, the vision of two angels seems hardly to have had any effect upon her. It is only when she hears her name that she has this

wondrous epiphany that Jesus is alive. As a true disciple (yes, it is only a scandalous woman in this story who reacts as a true disciple), she recognizes the voice of the Master and it is enough.

It takes a leap of the imagination to move from Good Friday and its horrific darkness and agony to Easter Sunday and its incredulous hope. That hope can be seen in each of these three characters this morning. Sin and evil and death are not to be allowed the final word. God's word, God's eternal Logos, is proclaimed the first, the last, and the Living Word in our midst this morning. His risen presence made known that first Easter Sunday is still at work prompting men and women to faith. And, lest we miss it, we should not forget that Mary, herself, is tempted. She is tempted to grab hold of Jesus and to not let go. And, many of us wish to do the same this day. "Take the whole world," we used to sing, "but give me Jesus!" Yet, the story-teller reminds us, to revel in an experience of the risen Lord while others are yet locked in fear, bondage, anxiety, and depression—without any real sense of hope—is not an option; it isn't a luxury in which a loving disciple can indulge. Jesus gently reminds her, "Don't cling to me." The relationship has forever changed. For, anyone who has seen the Lord, there exists an urgent need to share that good news with others. To continue holding onto the Lord reveals our own egocentricity, our own willfulness in spite of the news that life has been snatched from the jaws of death.

John and Mary, and a few verses later, Peter, all came to a newfound faith and restoration in the risen Lord. Each of them learned to have new eyes, but for each the experience was different. We, however, oftentimes wish to make our individual experience normative, to draw lines in the sand and suggest that the life story of others must conform to our norm. Yet, even as these resurrection narratives witness, God, in his infinite wisdom, brings different people to himself in oftentimes quite different ways. Some, like John, may need some physical manifestation. Others, like Peter, need the gift of forgiveness and a new challenge to ministry. And still others, like Mary, desire simply to hear their name spoken and the arms of the Savior made available. For all of these, and for all of us, God offers hope this Easter Sunday.

My friend, Dr. Randall Balmer, has a collection of somewhat autobiographical essays entitled, *Growing Pains: Learning to Love My Father's Faith*. The book is filled with stories of deep hurt—dashed hopes and dreams. You see, Randy never quite managed to live up to his father's story. Clarence Balmer had been gloriously and wondrously saved from a wretched past and he wished for his son a similar experience and a similar faith. Randy, however, grew up in the warm glow of generic American evangelicalism, and never quite fit, either literally or figuratively into the miniature pulpit his father had constructed for him on his sixth birthday. His journey was more circuitous and less certain, but no less grace-filled. At the end of one chapter he speaks a language some of us may recognize, enter twining his own story with the familiar strains of the creed when he proclaims:

"I believe because of the epiphanies, small and large, that have intersected my path—small, discrete moments of grace when I have sensed a kind of superintending presence outside of myself. I believe because these moments—a kind word, an insight, an anthem on Easter

morning, a chill in the spine—are too precious to discard, and I choose not to trivialize them by reducing them to rational explanation. I believe because, for me, the alternative to belief is far too daunting. I believe, because, at the turn of the twenty-first century, belief itself is an act of defiance in a society still enthralled by the blandishments of Enlightenment rationalism. I no longer envy the seminarians I knew twenty years ago, even though I'm sure those spiritual athletes are far ahead of me on the journey. I congratulate them on their self-confidence. They figured out all of their answers before I even knew the questions, and I will never be able to match their strides." Rowan Williams suggests that, "the Lordship of Jesus is not constructed from a recollection but experienced in the encounter with one who evades our surface desires and surface needs, and will not subserve the requirements of our private dramas. . . . Jesus grants us," he says, "a solid identity, yet refuses us the power to 'seal' or finalize it, and obliges us to realize that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him in the world of unredeemed relationships," (Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel, 76). For some of us, that call to continue to encounter the risen Lord may be a challenge because we long to experience him in the ways that others have. But Christ reveals himself in different ways to different persons for different reasons. For me, those abstract claims of resurrection life were rendered most concretely as the people of faith surrounded me and my wife as we both buried a daughter and as, just this past year, we baptized a grandson. In both cases, we stood in bewilderment before a mystery greater than ourselves. In both cases, we were graciously invited to become part of a story much bigger than ourselves—a story with its roots in an empty tomb. So, wherever you find yourselves this day, with Mary or Peter or John, or even with my friend, Randall, hear these words of the once agnostic C. S. Lewis, from his first book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*: "Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy. "Not now," said Aslan. "You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. "She couldn't bring herself to say the word ghost. Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her. 'Do I look it?' he said. 'Oh, you're real, you're real!' Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses."

"Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" our Lord asks. To which we, the church, the body of Christ, may now respond in words both mysterious and wondrous: "He is risen! He is risen, indeed!"