

Sermon, Easter Day

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

They planted the body of Jesus in a garden — like a seed waiting to sprout. Those who killed him and those who carried his body away didn't know what was going to happen, of course. One group thought they were getting rid of a trouble-maker — a threat to the rulers of Palestine. The others thought they were simply giving him the decent burial he deserved. But what they really were doing was putting the Lord of Life in a place that could not contain him.

In my years of reflecting on the Easter story, I never thought about the fact that his tomb was in a garden — a garden, of all places! It was a place to bury the dead, literally surrounded by new life. No wonder Mary came there weeping. No wonder she didn't recognize Jesus. No wonder she thought he was the gardener. She was expecting death in a place brimming with life!

I think this is what keeps happening, over and over again — at least, it's what keeps happening to me. Even though I know the story, even though I've heard all about the Resurrection, I get surprised when it actually happens. When I go to the tomb, expecting death, only to discover that I'm in a beautiful garden. And the Lord of Life surprises me by showing up in such a way that I don't recognize him at first — confounding my expectations.

Forty-odd days ago, I said that this was a Lent which really felt like Lent. I said that out my own awareness of loss and death and all the feelings which accompany them. Now, at the end of Lent, I think I understand Mary Magdalene a bit better. Mary is so immersed in her sense of loss that when she comes to the tomb that morning, she is dumbfounded to find the stone rolled away. The weightiness in her soul finds no equivalent at the entrance to that place of death. And the darkness of her spirit is in profound contrast to the light coming from the angels. They ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" When Jesus asks her the same question a few moments later, she has no idea that, standing right in front of her, is the very person whose loss she had come to mourn. Who else could he possibly be, but the gardener?

And so, I wonder: how often do I not recognize the presence of the risen Christ, mistaking it for something else? How often do I expect loss and decay when the stirrings of new life are right under my feet? One thing the Gospel invites us to do is look for life in the very place where we expect to find death — because it may just be surrounded by a garden we've never really noticed.

Last week, we held one memorial service at the beginning of the week and conducted one burial at the end, on Good Friday. I was amazed at the lightness of spirit that I felt during both services. In the first instance, a St. Philippian had finally been released from the

bonds of a terrible form of cancer. In the second, a member of our community was liberated from the grip of advanced dementia. Yes, there was the inevitable sense of loss at the death of two beloved souls. But there was also a surprising sense of joy in the conviction that the fullness of the Resurrection was finally theirs.

Diana O'Neill is the person whose life we celebrated last Monday. One of the greatest gifts she left was her witness regarding the meaning of death and why we don't need to fear it. With a long career in hospice care, both as a nurse and a volunteer caregiver, Diana knew at a deep level that death is an integral part of life. In expressing her desire to be cremated, she used some beautiful analogies:

"I'd like to be the breeze that gently sets the tall wheat in motion and then moves on." Another time she said: "I'd like to be a river flowing gladly forward to dissolve in the ocean." In a conversation with me, she said she saw her life and death as being like one of the last leaves to fall from the tree. She knew the remains of the leaf would dissolve into the earth. But its very disintegration would also promote the emergence of new life.

After Diana's funeral, Maria turned and said to me, "We ought to begin every Holy Week with a funeral." I'm pretty sure she wasn't joking!

Sometimes, the presence of the Resurrection is something we have to look for in the circumstances of our everyday lives. At our house, we have two dogs — one young and one ancient. Our eldest canine is nearly 18 years old, a wonderful Husky mix named Samantha. She's been with us most of our marriage, and our children have grown up with her. We've known for years that we're living on borrowed time in regard to this beloved member of the family. She can't hear or see very well — so much so that sometimes, she can't find the doorway to come in or go out. We can stand right next to her and call her name in a strong voice, but about half the time, she can't even hear us. She has arthritis and joint problems that make it hard for her to climb steps or walk very far. She's on three medications daily just to keep her going. But she won't miss a family walk — even if she has to endure pain and discomfort to be with the members of her pack.

We know what's coming one day, so we're trying to prepare ourselves. We tell Hannah and Will that we don't have long to enjoy her company. We try to imagine how much longer she might have and how the end might come. But, sometimes, the old girl really surprises us. We have a ritual before we walk sometimes, which is to get the dogs excited. When we ask repeatedly, "Do you want to go?" one of them will throw back his or her head and begin to howl. Sometimes, Samantha will chime in with a throaty, talkative reply. She delights us the most on our walks when she gets up a head of steam and actually gallops — as if to prove to us she's still got it. We're always incredulous that this great, grumpy old dog still has it in her to forget her aches and pains long enough to savor a playful moment of freedom.

We may miss the presence of the risen Christ when we forget its essential nature, which is self-giving love. Tennessee Williams tells the story of someone who forgot this. It's the

story of Jacob Brodzky, a shy Russian Jew whose father owned a bookstore. The older Brodzky wanted his son to go to college. The boy, on the other hand, desired nothing but to marry Lila, his childhood sweetheart — a girl as effusive, vital, and ambitious as he was contemplative and retiring. A couple of months after young Brodzky went to college, his father fell ill and died. The son returned home, buried his father, and married his love. Then the couple moved into the apartment above the bookstore, and Brodzky took over its management. The life of books fit him perfectly, but it cramped her style. She wanted more adventure — and she found it (she thought) when she met an agent who praised her beautiful singing voice and enticed her to go on tour Europe with a vaudeville company. Brodzky was devastated. At their parting, he reached into his pocket and handed her the key to the front door of the bookstore. “You had better keep this,” he told her, “because you will want it some day. Your love is not so much less than mine that you can get away from it. You will come back sometime, and I will be waiting.” She kissed him and left. To escape the pain he felt, Brodzky withdrew deep into his bookstore and took to reading as someone else might take to drinking. He spoke little, did little, and could most times be found at the large desk near the rear of the shop, immersed in his books while he waited for his love to return.

Nearly 15 years after they parted, at Christmastime, she did return. But when Brodzky rose from the reading desk that had been his place of escape, he mistook the love of his life for an ordinary customer. “Do you want a book?” he asked. The fact that he didn’t recognize her startled her. But she gained possession of herself and said, “I want a book, but I’ve forgotten the name of it.” Then she told him a story of childhood sweethearts. A story of a newly married couple who lived in an apartment above a bookstore. A story of a young, ambitious wife who left to seek a career — who enjoyed great success but could never relinquish the key her husband gave her when they parted. She told him the story she thought would bring him to himself.

But Brodzky’s face showed no recognition. Gradually she realized that he had lost touch with his heart’s desire — that he no longer knew the purpose of his waiting and grieving, that all he now remembered was the grieving itself. “You remember it; you must remember it — the story of Lila and Jacob?” After a long, bewildered pause, he said, “There is something familiar about the story, I think I have read it somewhere. It [seems] to me that it is something by Tolstoy.” She dropped the key, and ran out of the shop. Brodzky returned to his reading, unaware that the love he waited for had come and gone.

The great Good News of Easter is that the risen Christ shows up most often when we least expect him. He surprises us in those moments of profound sadness and loss, when we go expecting to find death in the garden of life. But unlike the woman in the story, Jesus will not leave us until we have every chance to recognize him for who he is. “I may not be the one you expected,” he seems to say. “But I’m the very thing you feared was dead and gone forever — the incarnate and undying Love of God.”

Today, *he is risen, indeed.*