



## THE UNTIDY STORY OF RESURRECTION

April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

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This past Monday we watched, helpless as a tourist, as Notre Dame de Paris burned. Disbelief, anguish, tears were seen in the faces of those standing on the outskirts of the devastation. Angry flames rose and fell; thick clouds of smoke billowed up as though they were carrying away this cathedral to God without a thought. All, all was lost.

Last Sunday's Scripture reading of the Passion narrative, Thursday night's Tenebrae service, and Stainer's "Crucifixion" sung on Good Friday left us in the same state: we listened helplessly as service after service detailed the arrest and the suffering and the death of Jesus. We saw those standing on the outskirts of that devastation—their faces of disbelief, anguish and tears. How the angry voices of accusation and condemnation rose and fell from all sides, until Jesus himself cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. Our own beloved, enfleshed cathedral of God carried away in death's thick cloud without a thought.

Then, the first photo appeared. An eyewitness let us look inside. There we saw the mass of charred and fallen timbers, like linen cloths of the dead dropped on the ground. Wisps of smoke still hung in the air. But then came our collective a gasp of awe. Almost in disbelief, we saw what we never expected to find. A beam of light broke at an angle from ceiling to floor. And beside it, something more dazzling still: that huge gold cross shining, standing in glory above the sculpture of Mary looking up toward God, hands raised, the body of Jesus stretched out before her. This haphazard scene declaring in extremes that there is death but there is also resurrection. Easter's great Alleluia is that the last word always belongs to God—



and God's last word is always, always light and life, a magnificence beyond our ability to fully express.

In a slim book on the weighty subject of the cross and resurrection, the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, describes what he calls “the untidiness of the resurrection stories.”<sup>i</sup> The Passion narratives are long, even polished, matched to Old Testament prophecies, detailing the order of events and locations, weaving together a complex account. But Easter is not like that. The untidy resurrection stories in the four Gospels do not always match up. Sentences become abrupt, extraordinary adjectives are employed, confusion reigns. “What’s going on,” Williams says, “is clearly people struggling to find words for something they had not expected.” “You have stories,” he writes, “that seemed to be squeezed, forced into being by the sheer pressure of events.” The resurrection is something that *came* to them, not something they stumbled upon after thinking about it and reflecting on it. There is a rawness to the Easter stories, he says, that only adds to their credibility. “We see how much of a shock it really was—and, of course, still is.”<sup>ii</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that when the women came from the tomb with their story and told it to the eleven and all the rest, it seemed to them, the NRSV translation puts it, “as an idle tale and they did not believe them.” In Greek, the word is “delirious.” Other translations say the women’s story seemed like nonsense, utter nonsense, a fairy tale, sheer imagination, even a madness, and “just stupid, useless talk.”<sup>iii</sup>

But of course, Jesus’ first followers did come to believe it...to know for themselves that Jesus was raised from the dead; that he is now, as someone has put it, “alive and at large in the world.”<sup>iv</sup> It is this belief that called the church into being at all—the community of those who believe Jesus is truly ‘alive and at large in the world.’ That he is now ‘Jesus without limits’—he is set free, and is not going to die again, so he is now acting eternally, ushering in the new creation. Jesus is not a memory. If he were only that, Christianity would be, Rowan Williams says, “the Jesus of Nazareth Society—rather like the Alfred Lord Tennyson



Society...looking back to a great dead genius.”<sup>v</sup> No, Jesus is the Risen Lord, alive, our contemporary in *this* moment of human history—and if he is our contemporary, then where he is active and present we should also be! To declare such a thing sounds like nonsense, sheer imagination, a madness, so we are grateful for lilies and brass and booming major chords that bolster and dress up our raw, untidy witness to Easter.

Heidi Neumark is the Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan. Before that, she was the pastor of a church in the South Bronx. Her congregation there included officers and leaders who were former addicts, undocumented people, people who were unemployed and homeless. One year during Holy Week, they decided to reenact the whole sweep of Jesus’ Passion. They began with a Palm Sunday parade through their streets, then entered the sanctuary where Jesus was tried, condemned and executed. Then the women came rushing in with their astonishing news, “He is risen!” and the men playing disciples expressed disbelief and called their story an “idle tale.”

The script then called for three members of the congregation to stand up and bear witness to the truth of the resurrection. “I know that he is alive...” each person was to begin. The first was Angie. “I know that he is alive,” Angie said, “because he is alive in me.” Then Angie told of the abuse she had suffered as a child, how she fell into despair and alcoholism and became HIV-positive. But then she told how the church welcomed her, and she began attending services, then a Bible study, too, and how she rose, bit by bit, from the grave of her life. The two other witnesses rose in succession, “I know that he is alive,” said the second... “I know that he is alive because he is alive in me,” said the third. And it was time to move on in the script, but spontaneously others in the congregation began to rise. “I know that he is alive,” one after another stood to say... “I know that he is alive because he is alive in me.” Homeless people, addicts, those we call ‘illegal’ and ‘alien,’ the least and the lost stood, one by one. Nothing could stop them. “I know that he is alive,” they shouted.<sup>vi</sup>



Recently, Victor Wu and I exchanged emails in the wake of his father's death after a brave battle with Parkinson's disease for over two decades. Victor and Ashley gave me permission to share with you a story they shared with me. Victor said: "In the end, I think my father was ready and he passed away so peacefully. A couple of months ago we were FaceTiming with my dad and our young son, Ashton, could tell that I was visibly upset. That's when he said, 'Don't be sad, Dad, when Yeh Yeh (which is 'grandfather' in Chinese) goes to heaven, he will be brand new and young again.' That made me feel so much better," Victor said, "and I passed that story along to my dad in his last days." And then Victor said this: "Ashley and I don't recall having a conversation with Ashton like that previously, so we are so grateful that through the Brick Church School and chapel and this congregation he acquired such wisdom of the grace of God."

This is who we are and what we are to do as the living community of the living and Risen Lord. To keep telling the story those first women told. Not simply as a memory we are sharing, as though we are the Brick Church chapter of the Jesus of Nazareth Society. No, we tell of Jesus who is our contemporary, the One who even now is alive and at large in the world. Who is free from every limit and eternally active among us and beyond us, so that wherever he is we ought also to be. And not only that, but we find that he is alive in us, too. So we keep telling our own stories of resurrection, untidy as they are, handing the story on from generation to generation. How would you tell it? The story that begins, "I know that he is alive...because he is alive in me." Though our words for so great a magnificence hardly seem adequate, our witness and way of telling it may be just the encouragement, the comfort, and the hope someone else needs.

Victor Hugo once wrote: "If you wish to receive of the ancient city of Paris an impression which the modern one can no longer furnish you, climb—on the morning of some grand festival, beneath the rising sun of Easter or of Pentecost—climb upon some elevated point, whence you command the entire capital; and be present at the wakening of the chimes. Behold, at a signal from heaven, for it is the sun which gives it, all those churches quiver simultaneously. First come scattered strokes, running from one church to another, as when musicians give warning that



they are about to begin. Then, all at once, behold! ...behold, rising from each bell tower, something like a column of sound, a cloud of harmony. ...the vibration from each bell mounts straight upwards, pure and...isolated from the others, into the splendid morning sky; then, little by little, they swell, they melt together, mingle, are lost in each other, and amalgamate in a magnificent concert [that] floats, bounds, whirls over the city and prolongs far beyond the horizon...<sup>vii</sup>

Easter's great alleluia is that God always gets the last word. And God's last word is always, always, always light and life. The mystery of an empty tomb. The magnificence of an empty cross turned into a shining gold...resurrection's untidy stories ringing out again and again like so many chimes running from church to church over the city and beyond the horizon of our sight, declaring: He is risen! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Rowan Williams, **The Sign and the Sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 76.

<sup>ii</sup> Williams, 75-79.

<sup>iii</sup> Translations represented here from the Common English Bible and the Complete Jewish Bible, the Living Bible, J. B. Phillips, John Knox and Wycliffe Bibles, and the New Testament for Everyone.

<sup>iv</sup> Williams, 65. He credits this "great phrase" to John Masfield.

<sup>v</sup> Williams, 69-70.

<sup>vi</sup> I heard this story told by Tom Long in his sermon, "The Dream Church," preached at the inauguration of Theodore J. Wardlaw as President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, March 28, 2003.

<sup>vii</sup> From Victor Hugo's **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**.