

Conversion

Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

Mark Ramsey

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina

They say that Social Security in this country has reached the tipping point, that more is going out than is coming in, starting now. *They say* that the Afghan government is so corrupt that peace and justice will never take hold there. *They say* that the earthquake last month in Chile demonstrates that the building construction codes in this country in earthquake zones are woefully inadequate, and it's just a matter of time until Seattle is a pile of rubble with victims numbering in the tens of thousands. *They say* that off-shore drilling will give a boost to our energy independence. Of course, *they also say* that it opens the door to almost certain catastrophe.

They say that the health care bill is finally going to take care of some of the least and the last in our society...unless what *they say* is true...and it is Armageddon. *They say* that after a decade at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, *all* countries involved are raising a generation of children who have lost a mother or a father, killed in the war, and experts don't know how these children will cope as they move into young adulthood.

They say that thousands of jobs are gone, and they are never coming back. So many days we live in the world of "They."

When Mary got to the tomb early that morning, it was a world with which she was well acquainted. *Does God have power over death?* Whether we want to admit it or not, I think that's why you and I are here this morning. We've got to know: Does God have power over death? *They* would say, "Of course not." And they have plenty of evidence: Rwanda, Bergen-Belsen, Katrina, Haiti, The Gulags, Darfur, crack houses, foreclosed houses, houses of abject pain and abuse. Lots of evidence. Lots of evidence that seems to mock Easter.

When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb that morning, she was in the grip of the World of "They." On seeing the tomb empty, Mary Magdalene exclaims: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him." Does God have power over death? Please! *They* must have done it!

In Flannery O'Connor's story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, her character "The Misfit" is a horrible and notorious outlaw who has terrorized and murdered a family after they had an auto accident on a lonely rural road. The Misfit is now holding the grandmother hostage. She is grief stricken and afraid for her own life, and she cries out, "Jesus....Jesus!" The Misfit answers,

Jesus was the only one who ever raised the dead, and he shouldn't have done it. He's thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then there's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow him. And, if he DIDN'T—then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you've got left the best way you can by killing somebody, or burning down his house, or doing some other meanness to him.

Gruesome as it is, The Misfit tells the truth. If Christ is not risen, then Easter faith is a horrible hoax, and nothing makes much sense in our world where things fall apart.

Forty years ago, the late writer John Updike wrote a poem, “Seven Stanzas for Easter,” which says in part:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.
The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.
And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

Updike warns that we dare not turn Easter into some tame metaphor, a diet of watery nothing that is quickly forgotten and holds no power or substance. The Misfit says that Jesus “done thrown everything off balance,” which I take that he means is bad in a world where we prize balance and stability over almost anything else. But what if...the “everything is thrown off balance” thing at Easter is not just an off-balance move, but a conversion of sorts.

Oh, I know. Conversion. Nearly a dirty word, conjuring thoughts of people ringing your doorbell with booklets to hand you and fears of being trapped on an airplane next to someone who spends five hours trying to save you. But what if, instead, conversion were the bold and gracious invitation to move from the Land of They to the world of Easter?

If we remember that *conversion* refers to *turning around*, look closely at Mary Magdalene in John’s account. Mary Magdalene had to be converted from the sincere and well-intended business she had generously undertaken—to take charge in a hope-less memorial act for a dead Jesus. Then, we are told, she looked and “saw” an empty tomb. Did she really see? Notice that there was no reference to God when she tells Peter. She was still firmly seeing the World of They: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb.” “They must have laid him somewhere.”

She was weeping outside the tomb as puzzlement is heaped on top of her grief. (The disciples – the men – interestingly get to the tomb, look inside; the text says

they “saw and believed”...and then they promptly went home. Huh?) Even when Mary Magdalene sees two angels when she finally looks inside the tomb, she is still in the World of They.

When asked about what was going on – by angels -- she says again that “they” must have done something—not that God had done something.¹

And then John says: “When she had said this, she *turned around* and saw Jesus there, but she did not know it was Jesus....Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him....”

Jesus does *not* live in the Land of They. He speaks to her: “Mary!” At the sound of his voice—she knows who he is. *She turns. She hears.* Instantly, she moves from the Land of They...to the landscape of Easter! A whole new world opens for her.

We need something as powerful as resurrection to take care of the Land of They forever. More than 20 years ago, a book was published called *Morning Glory Babies*.² It’s the story of a community of Christians in California whose ministry was with babies who had AIDS. It was written in the days when treatment for HIV and AIDS was not close to what it is today. The author writes: “From the media perspective, death is the essence of the story about our children. When finishing a story about a baby girl named Melissa, a television producer asked if his network could have an exclusive on ‘the end of Melissa’s story.’”

The founder of this community wrote in frustration: “For me, the only story is that Melissa is beginning to walk, or that she sings duets in an unknown language only babies understand.” That’s the difference between living lives the way *they* tell us life can be—and living an *Easter* life.

But you know, the Land of They offers us a conventional wisdom that is difficult to ignore. Sometimes, they speak a hard truth, just like that TV producer: A baby is going to die of AIDS. That was the truth. The Land of They can tell the truth about us sometimes. It’s just that *they* can never capture the whole truth. The world of They lets death and destruction have the final word. Easter brings God into the story – and with it, hope and power and love and meaning. And a baby’s song that is an “Alleluia” all its own!

The World of They is a lonely, lonely place. Easter is when we know we’ve found our way home. You don’t have to see God at work in order for God to be at work. You don’t have to leave a tomb convinced that Jesus is raised in order for Jesus to be raised. You don’t even have to leave church on Easter Day feeling like a new person in order for God to be, right now, making you into someone new. Or, as a Muslim friend of mine once said to me, “It seems to me that you Christians spend too much time trying to prove the resurrection...and not enough time being the resurrection.”

Of course, none of this is easy. To say God is at work, even when others don’t see it, even when you’re not sure you see it, having the courage to leave the Land of They is no easy matter.

One of my former seminary professors tells of the time when he was a seminary student himself. He was doing an internship at a church, providing pastoral care to families. One of the families was quite large, and their youngest child, Robert, had cerebral palsy. Whenever he visited the family, the family would often be gathered together in a large group, at the dinner table or in the den, laughing and telling stories...but not Robert. He was always on the outside, watching the others.

One day, it was just the mom at home with Robert. After some small talk, she

wanted to tell their visitor about something that had happened a few days before. Mom had been sitting in the family room in the late afternoon, and Robert was standing in the darkness down the hall, watching from a distance. Mom felt what she described as a “strange shift in the room,” a turning perhaps, something that caused her to look up from her knitting and down the hallway toward Robert. She said, “I saw Jesus with his arm around Robert’s shoulder.” She looked away, looked again, and there was only Robert.

Writing later, that pastoral intern, now seminary professor, says that he doesn’t know to this day what to make of it. But he does know that he and the mother reacted in two completely different ways. He decided to psychoanalyze the event, thinking to himself: “She feels so guilty about her child, she has projected her [perceived] failings through the symbol system of the Christian faith.”³

Now that may not have been wrong. There may indeed have been guilt for the mom; she may have wanted to have a vision. But I wonder if that reaction—the sort of reaction I have all the time to these kinds of things—isn’t just another way that we see the world with the “wisdom” of the Land of They whispering in our ears. The mother sees Jesus. Most of us see a psychological crisis. Mary sees a grave robbing conspiracy. Jesus arrives and calls her by name, causing her to turn, causing a conversion from the “Land of They” to the world of hope and life where Easter possibilities are found around every corner, everywhere we turn.

That mother? Did she feel guilty and that’s why she saw Jesus? Maybe she saw Jesus *because Jesus was there!* After all, because of that moment, she got to work in the community and started several programs for children with disabilities. What if she had written it off, listened to what *they* tell us?⁴

The conversion, to turn from the World of They to the world of Easter possibility is never easy, and most always, it seems, serves to throw us off balance. But to stay in the World of They – what they say, and how they tell you to think, and how they suggest you look out at your world?

That is no way to live. Even in the hardest times and hardest places, that is no way to live!

Will Williamson recently reported: “On two mission trips to Haiti with undergrads, there was widespread agreement that the most disarming thing about the country was the laughter of the children, along with their raucous singing. “How dare they sing when their life expectancy is so horribly short? Was their laughter an escapist respite from the unmitigated tragedy of their lives, or a smart rebuke to our assumption that their lives were trapped in tragedy?”⁵

As darkness fell upon Port-au-Prince after the earth heaved that night ten weeks ago, people danced in the streets and sang hymns. On CNN, Anderson Cooper was incredulous: “Don’t they know what *they* are saying about how bad it really is?”

Willimon concludes: “But what if the grieving women who came to the tomb on Easter morning are right? What if Friday isn’t the end of the story? What if Jesus told the truth—that he really is turning today’s tears into tomorrow’s laughter. “As far as I can tell, there’s only one thing we know that the world doesn’t: we know another story. Listen...in Port-au-Prince they are singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Alleluia!”⁶

I think our temptation at Easter is to spend too much time trying to prove the resurrection and not enough time *being* the resurrection. Today, tomorrow, sometime

this week *they* will tell you this or that. They will be so sure how the world works and what is possible and what can be safely mocked. But then you might just catch a glimpse or hear a whisper, and you might find yourself turning, and there is the Risen Christ: Hope in the midst of despair, Love daring to touch pockets of hate, Courage in startling abundance as you face a daunting challenge. And everything is off balance in your life in the best way you can imagine.

And *they*? They? They...are nowhere to be found!

Notes

1 I am indebted to Martin Marty for his exegesis of this text as found in "Theological Perspective" for the Gospel text for Easter in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, WJK, 2009.

2 Tolbert McCarroll, *Morning Glory Babies: Children with AIDS and the Celebration of Life* (New York: St. Martins Press), 1990.

3 Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009.

4 Thanks to the Rev. Ben Dorr for drawing my attention to this story and its context for Easter.

5 William Willimon, "Now Can We Sing?" *Christian Century*, March 23, 2010.

6 Ibid.