

Unexpected: An Easter Sermon

John 20:1-18

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One cold January afternoon in 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 out of LaGuardia Airport in New York headed to Charlotte landed instead in the waters of the Hudson River after losing power from a bird strike. I'm sure you remember that event, and the survival of everyone on board which instantly made a hero of the pilot, Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger. You likely don't remember Ric Elias from that day. Elias was sitting in seat 1-D. He said as that eerily silent plane glided rapidly toward the Hudson, his mind was filled with thoughts about his life, his work, his family. He said he thought about all the people he wanted to reach out to, all the fences he wanted to mend, but couldn't. He said in that moment, he was sad about how often his priorities had gotten skewed. He regretted the time he had wasted on things that did not matter. He had ranked people with less importance than they deserved. He said that that day, as the plane dropped toward the river, he knew he was going to die, and he was not afraid. But he was sad, because he had missed so much of life. He said, "I was given the gift of two miracles that day. The first was I survived. The second ... I was given the gift to see into the future and to come back and live differently."¹

Listening to Elias tell his story, I thought of a wonderful prayer that observant Jews sometimes use on the Sabbath. It begins, "Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles." This year it is a prayer that frames my approach to the Easter Gospel.

It seems to me that Easter, at its heart, is a day full of miracles. But not everyone notices. All of this magnificent music, all of the bold Easter affirmations of faith, all the confident words, they all testify to something miraculous. But miracles are not always easy to recognize.

For a lot of people, Easter is a hard day. For all of its hope and promise and festivity, Easter is simply challenging for some. Oh, they get decked out in some new spring clothes, and they come to church, because they've always come to church on Easter. But the day has lost something of the magic and wonder it may have held for them when they were younger. And the reason is precisely because it seems to be *all* brightness and light and alleluias, and frankly, that's not where they live. They would like to be there, but there's a problem. Their lives are more shadows than light. They are weighed down by great grief that lies heavy on the heart or by unsettling fears, large and small or by nagging feelings of guilt, recalling something done or left undone or by a corrosive bitterness that eats away at their hearts or by debilitating doubts that stand out in such stark contrast to the confident hymns and the sturdy prayers of Easter Sunday. So, if Easter is to find a place in their hearts, it will have to do so over against some pretty stiff opposition. It will have to contend with the shadows that obscure the dazzling light this morning heralds.

Such shadows, of course, are not the sole province of the post-modern mind. Indeed, they have accompanied God's people in their approach to every Easter dawn, including the first. I recently reread the resurrection accounts in all four Gospels, and

what struck me was just how lacking in confidence and certainty they all began. A pastor-friend says, “The wonder of the resurrection stories in the Scriptures is that they reveal the disciples’ ... resistance to coming to terms with the risen Christ.”² Eventually people found their voices and began to sing their alleluias, but not that first day. If there was music that first Easter, it was mostly muted, meditative, with only a few staccato bursts as hints of excitement.

Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead* and *Home*, reflecting on the Easter accounts from a writer’s point of view, said she was struck by the “angle of vision” of the Gospel narratives. She said,

The accounts of the resurrection famously differ from one Gospel to the next, and this fact enhances the interest of an element they [all] share, [which is] the skepticism of the earliest witnesses. Mary Magdalene, when she finds the tomb empty, simply assumes someone has carried the body away.... Others of his followers do not recognize him when he is among them, in large part because they believe he is, in the way of mortals, dead and gone. In every case the angle of vision is a skepticism based on the expectation that with Jesus’ death things will have taken their ordinary course. In other words, this-worldliness is foregrounded, even while the events themselves are nothing less than the grandest of [miracles].³

The skepticism of the disciples is rooted, I think, in their expectations and their inability to come to terms with the wildly *unexpected* thing that has happened. “Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.” The problem in the case of Easter, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is that its Good News is so odd, so unnatural. The Easter notion of resurrection also is made more difficult to comprehend by the fact that we live in the northern hemisphere, where Easter always occurs in the spring. And spring is so “entirely natural,” she says:

Buy a daffodil bulb in the winter and it looks like nothing in your hands – a small onion, maybe, with its thin skin and scraggly roots. If you have had any experience with bulbs, however, that does not worry you. You know all you have to do is wait. Come springtime it will escape the earth and explode with color, a yellow butterfly of a blossom shedding its cocoon. As miraculous as it is, it is entirely natural.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You do not wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off – not this side of the grave, anyway. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them.

That is all Mary was doing that morning – paying her respects, going to his tomb to convince herself it was all true. It was still dark, but even from a distance she knew something was wrong. She could smell damp earth, cold rock from inside. Someone had moved the stone! Afraid he would become a saint, afraid his tomb would become a shrine, someone had taken him away – God knew where – to a steep cliff, to the town dump.

His body was all she had left and now it too was gone.⁴

It was so unexpected. But it was nothing compared to what happened when she returned to the tomb with Simon Peter and the other disciple. Peter and the other disciple peer into the tomb, where they see the linen wrappings. Peter even sees the cloth that has wrapped Jesus' thorn-pierced head. Then they leave to go back to town, once again leaving Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb. She, too, then walks to the empty tomb and peers in, and this time she sees two angelic figures who ask her why she is weeping. She tells them she is weeping because "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Now in the other Gospels, the angelic figures (a young man in Mark, an angel in Matthew, angels in Luke) serve the function of interpreting the significance of the empty tomb. They announce the central theme of the teaching of the early church: "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell the disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." But here in John's Gospel the angels announce nothing; they merely ask Mary why she is weeping.⁵

Then another unexpected thing happens. She hears something behind her and turns around to see someone standing there. John tells the reader right away that it is Jesus, but because such an appearance was unnatural and so unexpected, Mary does not recognize him. New Testament scholar Gail O'Day says,

Since the reader knows that the gardener is Jesus, there is no suspense to this story. Its power derives not from the reader's dawning recognition of Jesus, but from the reader's waiting to see what will lead to Mary's recognition of Jesus. [And that] moment of recognition comes when Jesus calls Mary by name. [He says, "Mary."] In that moment, the empty tomb becomes more than the abstract truth of God's power over death. In that moment, the empty tomb becomes the concrete reality of the presence of the risen Lord.⁶

He calls her by name. This is the same Jesus who said earlier that the good shepherd calls his sheep by name. The Good Shepherd speaks, and suddenly the cloud of grief and limited expectation parts, and Mary responds, "Rabbouni" (my teacher). In hearing her name spoken, Mary's faith is formed. The empty tomb had not brought her to faith. "The empty tomb did not even hint resurrection for her," Fred Craddock says, "it only saddened her with the assumption that Jesus' body had been stolen. So far from faith is she that the appearance of two angels does not break her sorrow. Even the voice of Jesus does not at first stir faith in her. In fact, when she first saw him, she did not recognize him. She certainly was not looking for a miracle here. Only when he spoke her name... did she believe."⁷

And in that moment, a new expectation was created. Jesus was back. That new possibility suggested that things might return to normal once again. Even then, though, Jesus did the unexpected. As Mary Magdalene turned toward him, he said, "Do not hold on to me." No matter how much she and the other disciples may have wanted life back the way it had been with Jesus before Friday, Jesus made it clear that he would be relating to them differently from then on. "Do not hold on to me,"

he admonished her, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Barbara Brown Taylor notes:

It was a peculiar thing for him to say since there is no evidence she was holding on to him in any way. Unless it was what she called him – my Teacher – the old name she used to call him. Maybe he could hear it in her voice, how she wanted him back the way he was so they could go back to the way they were, back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like it was now. “Rabbouni!” she called him, but that was his Friday name, and here it was Sunday – an entirely new day in an entirely new life.⁸

And there was something else there in his words, also unexpected. Not only was he not back with them in the way they might have wanted or hoped or expected. Now, once again he was facing forward, and he wanted Mary Magdalene and the disciples to face forward, too, to live and lean into the new world of resurrection, and to follow as he pointed them into the future God had in store for them. Once resurrection takes hold, there is no going back, and the future is rich with possibility. Christ is no longer behind us, but ahead of us...unexpectedly still ahead of us. He is everywhere to be encountered, if only we have eyes to see, which is nothing less than miraculous.

Perhaps if we lean hard into that remarkable possibility, we won’t let “the days pass and the years vanish” and be “sightless among miracles,” but, like the man whose life was changed by Flight 1549’s remarkable landing in the Hudson, having caught a glimpse of the future, we will be moved to live differently, with eyes wide open to whatever surprises Christ has in store. It is in that fervent hope for you and for me that I begin the old refrain once again:

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

And if that’s true, as I believe it is, it would be wise to expect the unexpected.

Notes

1 Ric Elias, “Three things I learned while my plane crashed,” *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, filmed March 2011, posted April 22, 2011. I am grateful to Tom Are, Jr., and his sermon, “Standing Tall in a Shaky World,” preached April 24, 2011, at Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, for pointing me to the presentation.

2 O. Benjamin Sparks, *The Presbyterian Outlook* (March 31, 2005): 8.

3 Marilynne Robinson, “Living the Word: Easter Sunday,” *Christian Century* 129 (April 4, 2012): 22.

4 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 109-110.

5 R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 241.

6 Gail R. O’Day, “Homiletical Perspective: John 20:1-18,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 379, 381.

7 Fred B. Craddock, *John: Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 141-142.

8 Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Unnatural Truth,” 111.