

“*A Tale of Two Tombs*”

John 20:19-31

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If everything we knew about resurrection was from Easter morning, we might find this story from Easter evening a little jarring. I might, for a moment, think that the disciples were running down the streets playing brass instruments. Or I might think children were marching around with tulips.

Maybe the disciples gathered all of their friends for a rousing rendition of Handel’s *Hallelujah!* Chorus. “Don’t worry,” they’d tell them. “There is plenty of sheet music, just come on up.”

That’s fine! Resurrection certainly involves exuberance and joy. Mary must have had such feelings standing with Jesus in the garden before running back to announce to the others that she had seen the Lord.

Resurrection is a little messier than that. Of course, it is. It involves death and loss. Old, familiar things pass away and new life emerges with all of its uncertainty and possibility. Resurrection comes with fear, conflict, doubt, grief, and disorder. Newness doesn’t fit neat into our lives. There is a part of us that would prefer to keep parts of ourselves hidden away.

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Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has worked in the inner-city of Los Angeles for decades. He founded Homeboy Industries which primarily works to keep people out of gangs or to lead people out from gangs.

He was once invited as a guest on Dr. Phil’s television show. The producers wanted to feature Homebody Industries. Father Boyle worked closely with Dr. Phil’s producers trying to tone down some of the wild, crazy ideas they had for the show. Once he thought he finally achieved some form of moderation, he agreed to appear.

But when Father Boyle came out on the stage of the television set in front of a live audience, he was immediately horrified by the optics. There were two large props in the middle of the set. One prop was a beautiful mahogany coffin, and the other prop was a perfect replica of a jail cell.

Dr. Phil flew teenagers in from all over the country. Mostly, these were teens on the brink of gang involvement. He brought out the children and figuratively grabbed them by the lapels. In front of their distraught mothers, he shouted, “Don’t you see that your choice will only lead to here or here—to death or to prison.” It happened again and again.

Eventually, Father Boyle couldn’t take it any longer.

“Phil ...” he sneered, “these kids know this. They know it better than we do. They know it will end in death or in prison. They don’t care!”

Dr. Phil was trying to save these kids by offering them more information about the consequences of their choices. But Father Boyle has learned that such information is irrelevant. He knows change is not made because they read the right article, or go to a Bible study, or hear the truth from Dr. Phil. “It isn’t information that changes people; it is experiences.”

* * *

It was evening of the resurrection when the disciples had an experience of their own. Mary returned to the disciples to say, “I have seen the Lord.” The disciples were not running in the streets or polishing brass instruments or tending to the lilies. But they were sitting with their uncertainty, doubt, and fear. They were experiencing the messiness of shattered expectations.

This means to me that there is more than one tomb in the story: “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked in fear.”

What a loss! They didn’t make it to the sunrise service with the women. They were exhausted and fatigued. Every difficult feeling had coursed through their body, and now they were drained and lifeless.

* * *

These SHUTTERED doors make me
RETHINK *resurrection*.

What if the resurrection was pure ambition?

What if JESUS was forlorn
that the disciples themselves
were BURIED?

Perhaps, Jesus was so upset that the disciples
were behind locked doors that he got out of his tomb
to get them out of their tomb.

Jesus wanted them to unlock the door,
go back into world,
and continue what he had started.

However, the disciples needed to experience resurrection themselves;
they needed to know that they, too, were resurrected.

They are not simply locked in a house together,
but they were buried.

The stone may have been rolled away that morning,
but the door was locked that night.

And our tombs are places where
fear tries to rob us of our capacity
to love without reservation,

where shame makes people question
their own dignity,

where hostility inhibits hospitality,

where there is violence that demands
that we pretend that it is beyond
our ability to confront.

This is not what God intends for us.
This not the promise that animates
the life of the church.

* * *

It is interesting that the disciples were in a house
because the early church met in houses.

This is something in this story
about what it means to be church

The disciples are questioning their own significance to the world.

Some of them may have been feeling rejected.

Others felt abandoned.

Still, other felt confused and wondered,
“What just happened?”

Being locked in that house together meant they started to limit
what they believed was possible.

Their imagination was fragmenting.

Their boldness was crumbling.

Maybe, even the small disagreements
were feeling insurmountable.

This isn't a mistake.

The purpose of crucifixion is to bury the people who are still alive
and to fill them with fear
—to silence their resolve for a better world.

And it worked ... for about three days.
Jesus was gone, and the disciples
were entombed—barricaded—locked in.

All the doors that Jesus had opened in his life and ministry
—doors to those who hungered,
doors to the excluded,
doors to the marginalized,
doors to widows and orphans.
They were all slammed shut.

Who was going to fill the baskets with bread?
Who is going to remind people that are forgiven and beloved and cherished?
Who is going to clothe the naked or visit the prisoner?
Who was going to heal and pray?

* * *

A friend of mine named Jacob has a rich life of faith

He's Episcopalian, attends church regularly,
even volunteers on the church's finance committee.

But a couple of years ago,
he called me after a Maundy Thursday service
and said that for the first time in his life
he didn't want to attend Easter worship.

“After all I’ve been through,” he said,
“I’m boycotting this year.”

He had been through too much;
he had lost a family member
and his company downsized without him.

“I’ll be back in two weeks
but I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for Easter again.
There is too much pageantry for me.

It feels too rehearsed and scripted.
I can’t fake it right now.

I’m not saying it’s wrong;
it’s not just for me this year.”

But then he remembered that he **had** to go to Easter;
His teenage daughter was playing the trumpet.

(Maybe, that’s why he thought things were too rehearsed!)

He rolled out of bed that morning, forced a smile,
and sat in the back pew of the sanctuary.

He skipped the singing
and played on his phone.

He felt, mostly, numb.

When he got back to the car after the benediction,
He actually felt okay—relived even!

It wasn’t *too* bad!

The next day it hit like a ton of bricks.
He woke up crying and wept all day.

But it was that day, he said, that felt like Easter.
That day that he finally felt like he released
all of the burdens that had been burying him.

By the end of the day,
he could breathe more easily again.

“It was the best Easter I’ve ever had,” he said.
“Because it was the most honest.
I wasn’t looking for hope and joy.
I no longer thought they were possible,
but hope and joy found me anyway.”

To me, it sounds like Jacob
spent Easter with the disciples.

* * *

Notice that when Jesus APPEARS
at this LOCKED door
no one gets up to let him in.

We don’t even know if anyone
knew he was at the door.

I don’t think he KNOCKED.

No one UNLOCKS the door.

No one OPENS the door.

Jesus just FINDS a way in.

Jesus interrupts
the emerging pattern
of DEATH and FEAR.
And OFFERS *peace*.

Not once, not twice, but three times.

Locked doors ... fear ... disbelief ... uncertainty ... doubt ... shame ...
none of that stops the resurrection.

Jesus FINDS a way INTO the
most SHUTTERED places
and he does the most TENDER things.

He offers PEACE.
He SENDS them away from their tomb.
He breathes on them with God's SPIRIT.
He lets them TOUCH his wounds.

That's the experience of resurrection.

* * *

It might be easy to stop the story right there,
but it is not quite the end.

It is nice to know that no fear
can shutter a door so well
that God can't get in.

And it is tempting just to STOP there
and make it a story about disciples' comfort.

Jesus always has a purpose,
which is God's redeeming love.

And Jesus simply can't have the people
of God's redeeming love
tucked away in a tomb
of their own making.

I used to believe none of the Gospels describe resurrection.
Instead, we just hear reports
of the women finding an empty tomb.

I think we really do see an actual resurrection.

After showing them his wounds,
Jesus breathes on them.

It is like a resuscitation,
but it is more than that.

It is the same word as Spirit.

Jesus gives them a Spirit
and sends them back into the world.

It is the birth of the church.
And God's Spirit that doesn't flinch.
This Spirit that overwhelms their despair
—this Spirit that prevails in the face of rejection.

With that Spirit, the disciples are sent back into the world:

“As God has sent me, so I send you.”

Or try this paraphrase:

“As God got me out of my tomb;
I am getting you out of your tomb.”

* * *

Writer Megan McKenna shares about studying resurrection with a large group at her church. Her discussion focused on “that some of the most powerful acts of resurrection happen to the least likely people; that we are the people of resurrection and hope, called to live passionately and compassionately with others, to defy death, to forgive, and to bring others back into the community, to do something that is life-giving, that fights death and needless suffering.”

Then someone challenged her from the back of the church calling out harshly, “Have you ever brought someone back from the dead?”

She answered in the affirmative: “Every time I bring hope into a situation, every time I bring joy that shatters despair, every time I forgive others and give them back dignity and the possibility of a future with me and others in the community, every time I listen to others and affirm them and their life, every time I speak the truth in public, every time I confront injustice—yes—I bring people back from the dead.”

* * *

Jesus got out of his tomb to get us out of our tombs.
Then he breathes on us and tells us to do the same.

Notes

1. Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 129-130.
2. Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).