

An Easter Sermon: “A Sliver, A Cloud, An Opening.”

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I had to buy a used stove recently. The search took me past 500 taquerias to a lonely stretch of the west side and a small storefront full of hard-used appliances.

I felt so out of place. There wasn't a Whole Foods or sparking hibiscus iced-tea for miles! The store did have two Lurch-like employees throwing refrigerators around. The entire scene had a whiff of volatility. The prospect of violence always makes me acquiescent.

I almost asked the salesman if I could help him.

I have never felt more over-refined in my life. The salesman saw it. He had me back on my heels immediately. We struck a deal that seemed to make him happy.

When it was time to pay I saw a bald head with a gray horseshoe fringe around it, hunched over an adding machine in a small back room full of filing cabinets and old calendars.

The salesman asked me what I did for a living. I said “Pastor” and he replied, “A pastor!” Then he turned toward the head, “Hey Mushy, this guy’s a pastor. This stove better work or God’s gonna punish you!”

It doesn’t work that way. This guy liked his joke though. He said it again, “You hear me Mushy! You better look out.”

Mushy didn’t look up. I never saw his face. But I heard his voice. His accent was so deep into Eastern Europe it might have been Indian. Speaking very slowly he said, “God is not punish. God is love.”

His words cracked a space open. Just a sliver of space. But it was real. Prior to Mushy’s words there were no options but my own anxious mood and the store’s frightening environment. To use Donald Winnicott’s formulation, prior to Mushy’s words, all I had was “my inner experience and my outer environment.”

Months before Easter, Jesus told his followers he would be resurrected. It was an average day. They were walking down a dusty road. His friends and disciples heard him say it. He would suffer. He would be rejected. He would be killed. And on the third day he’d rise again.

They believed half of what he said. He’d die. Who doesn’t? And he would suffer. The facts guaranteed it and their mood portended it. They felt the threat of the forces allied against him. “I’ll suffer.” Yes you will. “And on the third day, I’ll rise again.”

That sentence hung in the air. His words cracked something open, a new space between the hard facts all around them and the ominous feelings deep inside them. His friends kept on walking.

Karl Barth says mortality pronounces “*A great no*” over us. The moment we realize we are going to die, the grave begins to erase our significance. We cannot stand it. Human strength loves to surface in defiance. So we protest death with a thin, shrill *yes*.

As individuals we scurry to earn by working too much in order to consume too much, convinced that every experience not realized *Now* will be denied eternally. As a nation we amass power and significance, backed by enough weapons to guarantee some kind of forever.

What I am trying to say is that death forces us to try and wring an eternity’s worth of meaning, pleasure, power, security, and satisfaction out of our constantly diminishing life-span. So we make too much of life. Then we suffer for it.

That’s one option. The second is simpler: give up. You don’t need me to list examples of our exhausted cynicism. You feel it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it perfectly. In the face of death our mood can either “frantically affirm life or hold it in indifferent contempt.”

Either way, death wins.

This means that mortality is the most powerful, unavoidable, all-determining force you or I will ever encounter. Which makes it God. Which means that God is negation, cessation, nothingness.

All of which is to say that if death wins, God does not exist. If you haven’t considered that possibility you’ve let piety silence honesty. And church is no place for lying. We’ve got to consider the possibility.

The women who made their way to the grave must have. Immediately Christ’s death and their own pain came barreling toward them. They wake up. Then they begin to give up. They trudge to the graveyard. The grief inside their hearts syncopated to the facts all around them. Death wins. There is no other truth, no other realm. Just the sadness inside them, and the grim reality outside them.

They walk straight into the tomb. Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes emerge. The women are terrified. Terror is logical when a stranger shocks you in a graveyard. But angels live to upend logic. They speak. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

The women look at each other. The space Jesus’s words cracked open on that walk has closed, but they remember it. His words are in their ears, but barely there. The angels begin to turn the echo of his strange promise into the sound itself. “He is risen.” He said it would happen. That he would rise from death. The space his words cracked open grows wide, and then wider. Wide enough to be a Kingdom. The women leap in.

And then they run. They can’t wait to tell the others. Our faith’s first four preachers, shouting while they run, “Peter, James, John, listen: Christ is risen!” God has beaten back the grave. Death may have a claim on you, but its grasp is weak. When

it comes for you, the grave's great "no" will be overwhelmed by Christ's resurrection day-break brilliant "YES." He is risen!:

They mean it. They feel it. They've heard the angels say it. Their words are met with disbelief. The apostles hear the women's sermon and write it off as nonsense. They close the door before it has the chance to open. Jesus is dead. A sermon in the face of that fact and their own feelings? Come on.

The women won't be silenced.

"Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed."

Words can make you doubt the strength of reason. They can push you past the limits of our logic. They can gesture toward something else. They can name a new space between your "inner experience and your outer reality."

Consider this: There is another way of knowing. There is another kind of truth. On Easter morning God creates a new way of living, more than this, a new reality, a new realm where death does not win. The new space I am describing may feel smaller than the hint of a sliver most days, but there is more than enough room for you to leap in.

Donald Winnicott echoes Jesus when he says that children have access to this realm. This is why they are fascinated by clouds and bits of fluff. Children thrill to aspects of reality that refuse to fit within its frame. Things that are with us, but also seem elsewhere.

What if Christ is risen? What if God is real?

You can call yourself a Christian and never come to church. You can celebrate Easter by going straight to brunch. And yet, you're here. You're here because you wonder. What if Christ is risen?

Quick! Before death slams the door shut again, listen:

You've been taught to live as if the whole of reality were confined to what you can see and to how you feel. But there is another reality! A realm that does not correspond to what you've been trained to look for. A kingdom that exists beyond and beside what our limited, blinkered facts can report. All the facts can see is what we've told them to look for. Live your life according to the results, and you'll shrink existence to a level far far beneath God's glory.

What if there is more? Peter wondered.

Peter wonders. The reality outside him can wait. The doubt inside him can wait. He sprints to the tomb.

Who sprints to a tomb? Has such running happened since? When Peter gets there, wariness eclipses wonder. He steps as cautiously as many of us stepped into church this morning. And he sees what we see. Christ is gone. There are no angels either.

All he has is the story the women told him and Christ's empty burial cloth. Peter picks the linen up. The cloth is in his hands. Sunlight through the tomb's door lights up its gossamer weave. Peter feels its warmth on his face. With nothing but this fine lightness in his hands, it hits him. Christ is risen.

*how should tasting, touching, hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

Peter steps into the Kingdom.

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

Christ is risen indeed.

Back in that appliance store on Laurence Avenue I didn't know what to say after Mushy preached the Gospel. "God is not punish. God is love." I wasn't in the mood for a sermon, no matter how short. The store remained intimidating. My mood was still sour. But Mushy's words stayed with me as I stepped outside to find my car.

It was a flat March day. More winter than spring. Maybe 40 degrees. Sunlight cut through the clouds in sharp rays. I looked down. There was a kid next to me. He leaned against the store. He was holding a plastic jar of bubbles in one hand and its wand in the other.

Bubbles are a strange toy for a late-winter day. Or maybe bubbles are always strange. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me and then he blew a bubble. This kid had a gift. The bubble got huge, as big as my head. It expanded and wobbled. Then it floated off its cheap plastic wand, up into the sky. We stared at it. The bubble was thin, but its skin held a translucent rainbow, shining against the March sky. It rose. It floated. I stepped in. Christ is risen indeed.

My story won't convince you. It holds no evidence. But evidence is not what God gives. Instead we get linen and angels, bubbles and sunlight, the words of the Gospel and the truth of resurrection. A sliver, a cloud, an opening. Christ is risen. Come on in.