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Easter Vigil on Luke 24:1-12

(Originally delivered at the Marsh Chapel Protestant Easter Vigil Service at Boston University on Saturday, April 20, 2019.)

Aftermath

Please join me in silence and prayer…

Between one breath and the next, in the interweaving of Sacred Silence and Human Words, Holy One, speak that we may hear, and hear that we may be known. Amen

As the sun sets and the paschal flame rekindles, we find ourselves gathered in this sacred space reenacting somewhat the way the men who had companioned Jesus, learned from him, and loved him found themselves behind closed doors, sheltering in place through the long Sabbath and into the night beyond…certainly unsure and fearful of their own fates. None of the gospels linger with these followers, however. What they thought or whispered into the silence of these hours remains lost to us. Instead, as the deep silence of Holy Saturday yields to the elongated shadows of Eastertide's first hours before the dawn, Luke turns us to the followers of Jesus who supported and undergirded his work financially and with ongoing hospitality. **These followers have also companioned Jesus, learned, from him, and loved him.** They have known his healing and taken his words to heart. And in the preceding days, they have stood in the tension of great pain and searing injustice bearing unblinking, unflinching witness of their **rabbi, teacher, healer, son, and friend** in the public spectacle of his dying and now in the reality of his death. In these moonlit early hours beyond the Sabbath's end, these followers—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other

women—do what they know to do: gather the herbs, spices, and ointments of death and make their way to the temporary grave to erase the horrors of public execution with the loving, gentle, tearful kindnesses of sacred ritual. They go to make themselves ritually unclean in order to handle a body in death with lovingkindness and compassion. They go in love and duty enacting all that is left for them to do…to whisper their prayers and goodbyes…to embody their grief…to lean on one another…and to let go of what might have been as they turn to what is left. Aftermath.

Before we enter the Mystery of the tomb, I invite us to pause and find ourselves among the women. Inhale deeply and catch the scent of aromatic spices, myrrh, and nard. Feel the weight of the vessel you carry, the uneven ground beneath your feet as you move through starlight in the night. Notice the profound weight of emptiness at the core of your being—the cramping spaciousness of grief fresh and raw mingled with the fortitude of duty to perform the rituals of death and burial *rightly and in good order*. We need to remember that whatever is about to be revealed to us in the first rays of the dawn, it is done on the open wounds of trauma and grief. The women go to the tomb to confront the incongruous face of Death and subdue it with love, community, tears, and touch. The Mystery of these hours is upon us. Ephemeral as candle flame, the paschal transformation occurs **but at great cost**. All transformation bears a price and places freshly hewn cornerstones into the foundations of aftermath.

We live in spaces of such transformative aftermath and rightly should remember that Easter was first experienced by people moving through profound suffering, grief,

and fear. In our world today, we can point to any number of instances where destructive aftermaths of violence and hatred, accidents, and natural occurrence devastate and unmoor. In these very hours, the people of Mount Pleasant, St. Mary, and Greater Union Baptist Churches in St. Landry's Parish, Louisiana, are welcoming Easter in the aftermath of racist-motivated arson. Meanwhile, Easter finds itself in the aftermath of floodwaters in Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Iowa as whole towns have washed away. Easter meets open grief in the twelve women and one boy killed when a church collapsed during a severe storm in South Africa on Thursday. It circles around thousands of children interred by our country and separated from their parents. It finds its way to the empty pulpit of New Bethany Missionary Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, and a congregation who mourns the homicide of their pastor. And Easter's transformation wends its way through the crowds around Paris' Notre Dame where our Vigil has already turned ***there*** to a new morning and song and the roof of this sacred space now opens to the greater cathedral of God's creation.

Alongside these encounters of frailty and loss, we bear our own personal places of pain. Relationships irrevocably severed…hopes dashed… diagnoses returned…daily stagnation and stresses of systemic neglect, abuse, and dehumanizing actions find us preferring not to go to the tomb but to shut ourselves away behind closed doors and locked hearts. And yet, despite the full force of destruction and aftermath through intention, accident, and circumstance, Easter's transformation sidles in…seeping through cracks and crevices, over broken glass and charred timbers…pouring upon the

broken hearts and fearful minds this night so that we now—and the women then—find not death and finality but luminous beings directing them—and us—to *remember* and to *go*.

Ronald Rolheiser notes there are two kinds of death. **Terminal death** is the cessation of life. It is final and ending. **Paschal death**, while also quite real in its finality, then moves beyond such ending to open "the person undergoing it to receive a deeper and richer form of life."[1] Likewise, there are two kinds of life. Resuscitated life moves us through an emergent experience and returns us to what we were before, essentially unchanged and unreflective. **Resurrected life**, however, alters us.[2] In resurrected life we find not the tomb and death but the transformative call to live onward as agents of memory and witness. Rolheiser notes the progression of such transformative aftermath within the paschal mystery "begins with suffering and death, moves on to the reception of new life, spends some time grieving the old and adjusting to the new, and finally, only after the old life has been truly let go of, is new spirit given for the life we are already living."[3]

The paschal mystery of Easter does not ignore or displace what it took to get here. Instead, it gathers up the fullness of our stories, each precious one, and invites us to truly remember what was…what is lost…and what will never be. In this space, we

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[1] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2014), 146.
[2] Rolheiser, 146.
[3] Rolheiser, 147.

may honor the expectations and hopes that will not manifest as we envisioned…or as others assured us they would. In remembering, we may gently begin to grieve our assumptions of permanence and continuity and find gratitude and grace for goodness that once was in spaces and places, experiences and relationships and will no longer be the same. In this remembering, we may also join our sisters and brothers at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as they now live into new and unanticipated realities and remembering, too. We remember with them and bear witness to their work of transformation each day. Such work engenders blessings such as Jan Richardson's "Blessing for the Place Between":

> When you come to the place between.
> When you have left what you held most dear.
> When you are travelling toward the life you know not.
> When you arrive at the hardest ground.
> May it become for you a place to rest.
> May it become for you a place to dream.
> May the pain that has pressed itself into you give way to vision, to knowing.
> May the morning make of it an altar, a path, a place to begin again.[4]

The "place to begin again" is the transformative work of resurrected life. Luke's "two men in dazzling clothes"—a clear indication that glitter is holy and a necessary part of Eastertide's celebration—don't allow us to remain in aftermath and memory. Nancy

[4] Jan Richardson. *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Time of Grief* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016), 155-156.

Claire Pittman notes, "On that first dim Easter morning, when women cowered in the dust and angels picked them back up, pointing them out the door of the tomb into the full light of morning, **the power of God was no longer unspoken**. The silence was broken, and the women rushed back to tell the others about what they had seen. No matter that the others did not believe at first. Who *could* believe, under the circumstances?....The women knew. The women remembered. The women believed. The women responded by breaking their own silence to speak their own truth. Which is, after all, exactly what God asks of us."[5]

In the paschal mystery, we are the bearers not only of the memories and grief but also of the *Word*. The women not only emerged from the tomb *bearing* the Good News—they *entered* the tomb with it! All they needed to enter into the first breaths of resurrected life was already deep within them waiting to be uncovered, revealed, *reminded* by the angelic beings in their dazzling clothes. And in this turn, *they were transformed*. Easter is not only the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is also *ours*. It is our liturgical reminder that we live and move and have our being in a multivalent existence of experiences, aftermath, and memory that can catch us up in cycles of loss and despair and hopelessness that quell our spirits. Where we seek simple resuscitation that returns us to status quo and the familiar, locking ourselves behind walls and rhetoric, terrified of change or difference, **Easter breaks through these cycles** refusing

[5] Nancy Claire Pittman. "Luke 24:1-12 – Homiletical Perspective." In *Feasting on the Word* **** (**, **), 353.

to allow us to crawl into the niche, pull the sheet over our heads, and take Jesus' place in the tomb. Instead, it beckons us into that Holy Silence –that quiet center at the core of our being—and turns us inside out. Calling us into *resurrected live* infused with depth and breadth of transformative meaning and purpose.

A few years ago, I took a student who was in denial that she had broken her ankle to the hospital. Half a day later, stretched across the backseat of my car, leg in a cast, she mused, "People always talk about being healed, but then never mention that the actual process of healing hurts. It really, really hurts." **Transformation comes at a cost.** Something must be let go, lost, upended, or destroyed for space to be available to receive what may come in hope and resurrection. Sometimes…sometimes, it is done willingly. More often, no so much.

And so, I entreat you in this Eastertide to embrace the fullness of each moment in all its complexities—to sing the *Alleluias* among the lilies *and* the ashes….to feel grief and loss alongside joy as they mingle in memory ow what has been and is no more…to lean into ritual and lovingkindnesses that bring about meaning and dignity…to risk seeing hope and possibilities in new ways…to wear the "dazzling clothes" and the fragrant scents of compassion and good news…and to find when you center down, at the core of your being each day, the entreaty **to live the resurrected life:** transforming, clarifying, life-giving, and renewing as the hands and feet, heart and mind, voice and eyes of the living Christ beyond the tomb. Amen