

Easter Sunday
March 27, 2016
St. Paul's - Peoria, IL
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“Soak it up... the resurrection is everywhere.”

This is the advice I received a few years ago, days before I left for Rome, where I would with seminary classmates for two weeks. My dad had died in a car accident weeks before, and when the rector of my parents' church learned that I was going to Rome, this was the advice he offered me.

Resurrection was an assumption in the conservative churches where I grew up - life in heaven after we die, new life away from this world if we have accepted Jesus and been forgiven of our sins. By then, I had encountered many different ideas in seminary, beliefs ranging from something we knew little about to the core part of our theology.

But in the shock, numbness, and blur of my grief, these words sent me to Rome yearning for something more, longing to know something about this idea which has held hope for so many - hungry to encounter a reality of new life.

When I arrived in Rome, however, it did not seem like resurrection was everywhere but rather, that the place was soaked in not just death, but the celebration of it. Death was gilded in many places, celebrated in glorious shrines with made-up, mummified bodies, and martyrs were remembered according to the manner of their gruesome deaths. It was hard for me to believe it was their lives that were celebrated, because of the strong association with *how* they died. It seemed that it was actually their death being celebrated.

But my biggest struggle in this gilded celebration was another question - doesn't this often happen when people die for a cause? There are many stories of a leader's death inspiring his followers to take up the movement after him. That would make sense if Jesus were still dead, but we believe that he rose from the dead.

Is this all we mean by resurrection?

I don't know about you, but I need resurrection to mean something more than the camaraderie brought by a society's heroic dead. Resurrection that I can hope in is not gilded material. I need something more than a fancy, upgraded version of our daily life as it is now in this world.

But that is what we often turn resurrection into.

So many of our pictures of the resurrected Jesus show a bright white, spotlessly clean, glowing figure - we assume just like what Jesus looked like before, but now free of all that first-century Palestinian dust and complete with a heavenly glow.

But that is not the resurrected Jesus we hear about in our Gospel today, not the image of resurrection that those first disciples encountered. And I have found that when we know the resurrection as they did, we too will find that it is everywhere around us as well.

Our Gospel story starts 'while it was still dark'. Mary Magdalene shuffles to the tomb in the darkest hours before the sun. The events of the past three days were surely traumatic as she watched Jesus tortured and violently killed, rejected and scorned by her people, leaving her afraid and unsure that anyone could be trusted.

Yes, it was dark, so she stumbles alone through that fog of shock and grief to mourn, because it is all there is left to do.

What she finds is an empty tomb. She returns for two disciples, who come and also see the emptiness, and then return home. But Mary stays, weeping, in the dark. Even the appearance of angels does nothing to assuage her grief.

Finally, she turns around and in front of her is Jesus. But she doesn't recognize him. She supposes he is the gardener!

Did you get that? One of the closest disciples of Jesus, upon seeing him resurrected, mistakes him for a gardener.

Most of our pictures of the resurrected Jesus do not look like one who would be thought to be a gardener. In fact, I'm pretty sure that he is just about the opposite of clean and glowing. Rather than floating just above the earth, these sandaled feet are muddy. This hair isn't flowing in the breeze - it's flecked with grass. Instead of freshly manicured hands, there is dirt under these fingernails.

This is the resurrected Jesus that Mary encounters. I guess he wasn't what she was expecting either.

But then he calls her by name. And she suddenly knows that this is no ordinary gardener. This is Jesus. And her mourning is turned to joy,

Mary did not immediately recognize Jesus, so he did not look exactly the same. The resurrected Jesus was not a clean, glowing version of the man she knew. The resurrection was something new, and everything has changed.

Jesus tells her not to cling to him, but now she is to go to his brothers and tell them what she has seen. Go to the brothers, hiding in their homes. Go tell them because they need to know the good news - he is risen. Go to the brothers - because there, together, is where Jesus will be now.

The community of Jesus is changed, in fact, it has been created in a new way. They will no longer cling to the body of Christ they knew; instead, the presence of Christ will be among them in their life together.

What the resurrected Jesus was doing among his disciples was new. The resurrection had come among them, and it was not some gilded, upgraded version of life as they knew it. It was something never before seen.

In it, people came to love and live together in a way the might of Rome had attempted and failed. In this body, God was reweaving the very fabric of their humanity, reconciling what was broken, and healing wounds they thought could never mend. Resurrection was not far away - it was very much among them, very much a part of their humanity.

What those disciples learned is true for us as well.

Resurrection is not some gilded version of life, and it is not an escape from our earthly, scarred bodies. Resurrection is for us here, now, stumbling in the dark, complete with our dirt and scars.

And should we be surprised? Not at all. For this is where God has always worked.

Since that very first verse of Genesis, the first words of our story, it was over the darkness that the Spirit moved. And this Gospeller, John, told us at the beginning of his telling, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." And so in the garden, when God appears as new life, beginning the work of re-creating our world, there it begins again - in the dark.

And so it is with us.

In the dark of our own world, in the dark of our own souls, is where God is creating new life. And we shouldn't be surprised if resurrection as we encounter it comes a little dusty like the gardener Mary encountered. And that is why we have hope - because the resurrection doesn't come to us as something otherworldly, unattached from the lives we live. The hope of the resurrection is that it comes in the very lives we have now, the messy dirt of our lives where this Gardener is growing new life.

New life looks like a relationship that is given another shot after forgiveness. New life is when that dark secret has come to light, and you realize that for the first time you can live without fear, and be authentically, fully who you are. New life looks like the day-by-day journey of recovery from alcohol and substance abuse, and the friends family that walk with them. New life is reconciliation with family members that you never thought was possible. New life is the gradual healing of wounds and learning to trust when you thought you never could again. New life is the love that seeps into wounds and begins the slow work of healing them. New life is the ray of hope that gives meaning and strength to our struggles. New life is being made whole.

New is not being made sparkling and clean. New is not a gilded version of life, free from all memory of the past that made us who we are. New is not a life away from this world God created for us.

New is being made into the people we were created to be, and it is happening all around us. New is life that God is re-creating here among us, life that is abundant and whole and good, life that begins now and goes on forever, life that will never end.

This is what we will find too, if we stumble like Mary into the darkness, searching for our God even when every fiber of our being tells us that he is absent from our world. For it is in the dark that the Creator who came among us will meet us, marked like a gardener by the very soil of our lives where he is working to bring new life.

This is what we share a taste of here - in this place where we believe that God is bringing us together with all of our differences and diversity, making us into the beloved community, sharing life together with all our beauty and our wounds, which sometimes are so intertwined we cannot tell them apart. Here we share life as broken people who God is making whole together.

Often we like to believe that our life as a community, as a church, should also be an escape from this world, a glowing, clean, otherworldly life. But it is not any more than the resurrected Jesus, because it is in our very humanity, our very lives that God is working among us and bringing new life. It is not simple or clean or easy. But it is good.

And so here we share the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, which together makes us whole. We take it into our very selves and are remade by the one who is not dead, but has risen again and is re-creating us and all of our world. We take in this ancient meal, and together we are made new.

Come, come and share with us.

Come as you are, wounded and wonderful, broken and beautiful, no matter who you love or who you've lost, what you've done or where you've been. Come and share in the new life that God is creating all around us and among us and in us.

The resurrection is everywhere.

Soak it up.