

“IT WASN’T THE GARDENER!”

Acts 10:34-43

April 4, 2010

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

We don’t often hear John’s version of the Easter gospel in church. It is both considerably longer and a lot more complex than the other three gospel writers’ accounts. I’ve been reading the story over and over again this week, and the more I read it, the more it intrigues me.

Obviously the central person in this narrative is Mary Magdalene who, finding herself bereft over the loss of her Lord, in the inky darkness, before even the first light of morning, she picked her way up the rocky slope to Jesus’ tomb. There, she thought, she might privately surrender to her grief—to sit alone outside of where her Jesus’ body lay inside. The image of her intention is so powerful: a solitary figure in the darkness, as close as possible to the one she had loved. But when Mary reached the tomb, her intention gave way to shock. The stone was rolled away, the body gone, and she ran down the hill, through the city to get John and Peter. They too ran, and when they reached the empty tomb, they looked inside. Curiously they then went back home again, lost somewhere between bewilderment and hope.

But Mary was made of sterner stuff. She would not budge until she had answers. She stood weeping at the tomb, “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him.” She is the image of grief, confusion, love, and persistence. Lost in her not knowing, she sees a man, but does not recognize him as Jesus. In what passes in John for humor, she thinks him the gardener. And then he calls her name, “Mary,” and she recognizes him. Back she runs again, down the hill to tell the others, all the others, throwing open the door to their lodging place, and crying out “I have seen the Lord.”

Mary was the first to understand resurrection, a mix of wild joy and absolute faith. I have met others like her, ordinary people, some of you here in the pews this day, people who have had a similar experience. One minute you see the world as others see it, then something happens: a meeting of the eyes, a cup of water given, a profound moment of grace and, of an instant, you see the Risen Lord where just a moment before stood only a gardener. The church is blessed by those faithful souls who know the truth of the resurrection as certainly as they know their own names.

It’s so tempting here to proclaim this Easter morning only the experience of Mary, only to cry in one voice, “We also have seen the Lord!” But that’s simply not the truth, not the truth of our experience, not the truth of this story. It took me a while to pay attention to the figures of Peter and John in this text. Alongside Mary’s explosive joy, it’s easy to count them as mere window dressing. But the gospel writer sends them running up that hill for a reason, and they are bold to look in the tomb—Peter even to enter the tomb—and see the linen wrappings neatly folded. The gospel writer tells us that as they made their way home, they “believed.” It’s such a quiet statement in contrast to Mary, a whisper really. What did they believe? What meaning did they find in that empty tomb? All we know is that they found “something.” Something changed for them. Not yet the full ecstatic truth of resurrection, but a shifting from the darkness of loss to hope maybe, to belief that God was not done yet, though they could not articulate the how or why or even the substance of it.

Does that sound familiar to you, to some of you? I believe that there are many in the church who come each Easter Sunday and hear the words that “Christ is risen,” and their hearts lift, and hope expands, but to them, to us—I count myself in that number—it has not yet been given to fully apprehend resurrection’s light. We don’t have Mary’s certainty, and yet we are not left unchanged. We yearn towards the risen Christ, and in that yearning, we hold our place among Christ’s disciples.

And then there is a third group in this story. According to John, there were many of Jesus’ company who did not go near the tomb that day. All they had of Easter morning were the stories of the others: Mary’s impassioned “I have seen the Lord” and John and Peter’s more cautious telling. Interestingly, these less engaged stayed among the company of disciples; they did not fall away even though their doubt outweighed their belief. They stayed, and watched and waited. I knew a man once in Seattle, a lawyer named Mack Fredin, one given to verbose intellectualizing and outrageously ugly bow ties. He told me once that he came to church “not because he believed in all this life from death business,” but because he held open the possibility of belief, and even if he was wrong, he hoped the church might do some good along the way. My guess is that the ground he stood dated back all the way to that first company who called themselves disciples.

My point is this: that John the gospel writer makes it clear to us that on the first Easter as on this one, the company of Christ’s followers heard the cry of “He is risen!” with hearts and minds that ran the full spectrum of belief. And still disciples all, they stayed together, they prayed together, they loved each other and served the poor together; they searched the scriptures and sought the Christ. And over time, through their constant love and fidelity, some of the watchers became yearners. And those who yearned: one day, on a rocky hillside, or in the corner market, in a room alone, or talking with the gardener, or a friend, a granddaughter or a panhandler on the street—when they might least expect it—of an instant, something shifted, and they too knew “I have seen the Lord.”

And so let us, each of us in our way this Easter Sunday, watch and wait and hope and yearn and proclaim the resurrection that we know. God blesses us in all our mix of faith and doubt. For such have been and so are, and probably always will be, the company of the faithful disciples of the Risen Christ. It is all of us together who are the church. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Amen.