

**WHEN MYSTERY ENGULFS REASON; JOHN 20:1-18; EASTER/MARCH 27, 2016;  
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A few months ago visiting Fort Bragg where our son was stationed, I made the mistake of taking pictures of the Joint Special Operations Command Headquarters – the nerve center for Navy Seals, Delta Force, the Green Berets and Army Rangers.

My son quickly advised me to put the camera away – they don't like people taking pictures of that building he said, you could get us detained for questioning. You see, even though I was quite aware of being on Fort Bragg, I forgot for a moment – in a larger sense – where I was.

Understanding ourselves and the world makes all the difference in terms of how we go about achieving our personal goals and calling in life. And because we live in a technological age we defer to reason and quantifiable analysis to solve every problem. Our appetite for information is insatiable; research universities are the new cathedrals, we baptize graduates with advanced degrees for success in life – often defined as social status and material wealth. The myth of the apple in the Garden is that our hunger for knowledge disguises a deeper impulse – to be like God – which causes us to forget who we are, where we are, and why we are here.

The name for this is pride, intellectual pride – the greatest of the seven deadly sins. It has led, in our time, not just to misreading the purpose and depth of human experience but also the depth and nature of God.

The imaginative story and myth of the Bible when dissected into its various sources, forms and cultic voices results in the fundamental fact of religious experience about which those stories were told, then written, being, as it were, rolled out so thin and flat as to be finally eliminated altogether.

There is an old German saying, "Ein begriffener Gott ist kein Gott" – 'A God comprehended is no God.' To affirm that the historical God is beyond the methods of science to explain and define is to wave a red flag in the face of the intellectual establishment of colleges and universities, and even some theological schools and churches.

Small wonder then that there has been a rolling out and flattening of the human being – increasingly seen as but a series of incremental steps in the long march of evolution, our brains and appetites determined ages before when we were hunters and gatherers – our ethics and morality considered the product of our discovering the success of collaboration versus competition for preserving the species.

So writers and artists in Europe and America by the 1930s, Alfred Kazin says, started to despair. They stood face to face with the eclipse of the old sense of right and wrong that was founded on a belief in immortality (what today we call resurrection) and the final court of eternal justice. There was no longer a cosmic authority to keep the human heart from hopeless despair.

Their stories had such titles as: The Trial, No Exit, The Plague, and The Man Who Disappeared.

Contributing to the malaise and despair and to epidemic use of pain killers and recreational drugs, are the treadmill of success and its accompanying mantra of consumerism, "I am what I own"; not to mention the wars we have sponsored – second to none in the history of civilization.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Blaise Pascal describes the root of our fear and despair: "When I consider the short duration of my life swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space that I fill, and can even see, plunged into the infinite immensity of spaces, which I do not know and who do not know me, I am frightened and astonished. Who put me here? By whose order and direction are this place and time destined for me? The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me!"

My purpose on this Easter morning is to probe the story of the empty tomb from the Gospel of John and consider what it tells us about the great orienting questions of life and that answers Pascal's deepest questions about our purpose and destiny.

When Mary arrives at the tomb on Easter morning she was intent on one thing – going to the body of Jesus to conduct the ritual funereal preparation with herbs and spices. When she sees the stone rolled away she immediately, logically concludes the body has been stolen for what else could she conclude?

She runs to give this information to Peter and to the other disciple; when they hear her story they run to the tomb to see if Mary's information is correct; and they, too, see the stone is rolled away; Peter enters the tomb first then the other disciple and John says 'they believed' meaning they believed the veracity of Mary's story. The body had been removed, most likely stolen.

But Mary, remained after the two left; for, as John says, they did not as yet understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead; indeed how would they understand such a prediction or conclude that that is what they were witnessing, so they go back to their old world.

But when Mary ventures into the tomb she sees two angels who seek to console her – for she is clearly distressed; then, when she turns around, she sees a man she assumes to be the gardener but whom John tells us is Jesus; and in what would be a touch of humor were it not so tender Mary asks the man if he is the one who has removed the body and where she might go to find it.

At which point Jesus calls Mary by name and she recognizes him instantly because of the physical sound of *his voice* pronouncing her name; and we witness what is surely one of the Bible's most remarkable moments: like the legendary continent of Atlantis rising from the sea; or the moment Lucy leads her sister Susan and brothers Peter and Edmund through the wardrobe into the land of Narnia – it is the collapse of the old structures of plausibility as happened when Newtonian physics gave way to Einstein's reality that allows for the bending of time and space. It is a new world.

Jesus instructs Mary to go and tell the disciples that he is ascending to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God. And she goes, with haste, and announces these things to the disciples.

Neither miracle, nor metaphor, nor magic Mary's encounter with Jesus at the empty tomb can only be described as belonging to the realm of mystery. As such neither theologians nor scientists can explain what took place that morning for it is an event that can only be proclaimed.

It is no surprise that the season of Easter continues for fifty days during which Jesus continues to appear to his friends – it takes that long for the news to sink in; for the disciples to get their bearings in the new land of Resurrection. Nor is it surprising, the first thing they do after that new awareness has settled into their hearts or rather their hearts have settled into it is that they start the church on Pentecost.

The direct result of the Risen Christ, loose in the world, is the coming together of this new community whose sole purpose is the telling of this remarkable story and the proclaiming of this stunningly good news – the realm and power of death has been defeated.

If that is your calling and mission then you will tell that story in all the places where it needs to be told, where people are desperate for healing and hope; you will go to all the places where death keeps men, women and children in its icy grip: in prisons and hospitals and back alleys of cities; you will tell the story where poverty crushes children and the pursuit of material wealth destroys marriages and families; you will go to places like Flint, Michigan and Ferguson, Missouri; and the city of Goma, Congo where Jericho Road Ministries has asked us to join them in a medical mission for children who have lost their families in the Congo's ethnic cleansing.

And you would tell the story, as we at Westminster have told the story and proclaimed resurrection, on the West Side of Buffalo where new immigrants, whose children still remember living in UN camps, make new homes.

Proclaiming the story of resurrection is to proclaim and build the movement called the Kingdom of God; it is to celebrate the wonder and gift of human life, it is to do the brave work of justice and to witness the joyful healing of broken relationships; to proclaim resurrection is to answer the question of who we are and why we are here.

Marylinne Robinson says something like this: If His presence in the Creation asserts the human as a uniquely sacred and intrinsic aspect of Being, and his presence on earth surely does, then how are we to believe that he, call him Christ, call him God, would sweep the whole of our species, whom he has relentlessly sought to restore, out of existence, or into some sort of abyss? Rather glad reunion, to receive unto himself, beyond our capacity to fathom how, each of us unique, beloved, if flawed.

Or, Robinson continues, it is inconceivable that the God of the Bible would shackle himself to the worst consequences of our worst behavior. Rather the reach of Christ's mercy would honor the long road of human struggle and the full palate of human diversity.

Maybe his constant blessing falls on those great multitudes who lived and died without any name for him, or for those multitudes who know his name and believe they have only contempt for him. C.S. Pierce said it would be most Godlike of God to love those least like himself.

Others have attempted to find the right words, to convey what this day must have been for Mary and what this day is, I daresay, for many of us here this morning.

William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* comes as close perhaps as anyone recording from others' religious experiences what Mary must have felt in the garden when Jesus called her name: "The perfect stillness of the night," one believer told James, "was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two."

Or Alfred North Whitehead, one of the greatest mathematicians of his time who writes, "religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something which gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes our apprehension.

Proclamation. Good news. Not formula or analysis or provable propositions – at least by the methods of science. The crux of the matter of Resurrection is where we place our trust: in the verifiable conclusions of linear logic or in the Risen Christ?

If you haven't seen him or felt his presence at the break of day or in the middle of the night, there are the fifty days of Easter that follow this glorious morning; when he appeared on a lonely road to two of his followers lost in their disappointment and grief; on a deserted beach when the fishermen were returning on morning with their catch; and as one, late to the party, the great Apostle who never saw or knew him in the flesh but encountered the Risen Christ on the hard road of his professional obsession fueled by avarice and cruelty, veiled as righteousness and virtue.

The common thread to each and all of these is that they had no idea or expectation that he would walk into their midst to awaken the life within them.

And for those who encounter him, who hear him call their name, there is the response of Mary, "Rabbouni" meaning Teacher.

And then the sound of footsteps running back to the others to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" Amen.