

Destined for Love
I Corinthians 15:51-57
John 20:1-18

“For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!* Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, the kind of dark we choose instead of the light, the kind of death we choose instead of life, Mary Magdalene set out for the tomb where her dead friend had been “laid to rest” as the saying goes. As far as she *knew*, his corpse was rotting behind the stone that sealed his tomb against grave robbers. As far as she *knew*, she would simply be sitting vigil until the sun rose in the sky. Yet I also imagine her mind spinning on her way to the garden, the way our minds spin when some inescapable fate has befallen us, when some uninvited misfortune invades our lives from without. If only Jesus had not come to Jerusalem during the Passover. What will be our future without him? If only the disciples had not deserted him. What will become of us tomorrow and tomorrow? If only Judas had felt himself more a part of the group. Will I ever be happy again? If only Pilate had chosen Barabbas. What now shall I do before the inevitability of my own death? One minute we are rehearsing all the ways life might have been otherwise, the next worrying about what will come upon us unwanted in a future that seems foreclosed.

In a word, Mary is in the thrall of death before and behind. Her destination that morning will be her destination every morning until she lies to die: she is going to the grave. She arrives and sees that the stone has been removed, a fact that leads her to assume Jesus’ corpse had been taken. Why else would the stone have been rolled away? To say the least, this further and uninvited misfortune was insult to injury. She runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple with the news: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” “They” being whoever is against the “we” of Jesus’ bedraggled and disheartened followers. The news this morning is like the news that has been and like the news that will always be if death has dominion: a “we-they” world that separates, that deepens the divides, that focuses what is left of your one precious unrepeatable life on fear and anger and suspicion and blame. I think we know that world intimately, the news this morning being like the news we have heard every morning in recent memory and like the news we will hear every morning yet to dawn as long as death has dominion and the grave is our destination.

In response to Mary’s news, the two disciples race each other to the tomb to see for themselves. The Beloved Disciple is the first to see the grave clothes abandoned and the body missing. Next Peter enters the tomb and sees the cloth that shrouded Jesus’ head rolled up in a place by itself. The Beloved Disciple believed, we read, but believed what? Contrary to what I have always assumed—that seeing the empty tomb, he believed Jesus had been raised from the dead—I am persuaded instead that he simply believed Mary’s news: the corpse was indeed gone. I think this not only because John says “they did not yet understand scripture, that he must rise from the dead,” but also because they just go home, like many will go home after this Easter Sunday morning, to live and breathe and have their being as though death still has dominion, as though the grave is their destination.

But Mary remains in the garden weeping. When she finally ventures to the door of the tomb, two angels in white, sitting where Jesus’ body had been, ask her why she is weeping. In the grip of death, she repeats the morning news to the angels, this time making the news personal, for she now is alone in her grief: “They have taken away *my* Lord and *I* do not know where they have laid him.” I think this morning of all those for whom the news of death’s dominion is personal: the families of Palestinians dead at the border, the grandmother of Stephon Clark dead in her backyard, the friends of Venezuelans dead in a prison fire and the parents of Russian children burned to death in a shopping mall, the community whose friends have been slain in their schools or shot dead on the streets of their cities, and those among us, even now, watching the slow encroachment of death overtake one they have loved their whole life long. All these grieving as those who have no hope because they are in the grip of death’s dominion this morning. “Why are you weeping?” the angels ask Mary, messengers of God whose presence should dispel any notion that

Jesus' body had been stolen. Except that the angels have no effect on Mary's understanding. How much we miss of God when we grieve as though death has dominion, as though the grave were the destination of our beloved.

No sooner is the news of Jesus' missing body out of Mary's mouth than she senses someone has joined her in the garden. *We* know it is Jesus but because her seeing and all of her senses are in the grip of death, she sees a stranger—the gardener, she thinks. “Sir, if you have carried him away....” You sense in her words a bare sort of hope that this man might lead her to Jesus' corpse so that she can take care of what is left of him. Do you not see how the logic of death's dominion blinds us to his living presence, keeps our ears from recognizing his voice, closes our minds to his word and distances our hearts from his love?

Unless...and until...we should hear his voice calling our name. “Mary!” “Rabbouni!” I imagine Mary responding breathlessly as she reaches out to hold onto the body of her living Lord who has death behind him. Surely e.e. cummings imagined this moment when he wrote: “how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any--lifted from the no of all nothing—human merely being doubt unimaginable You? (now the ears of my ears awake and the eyes of my eyes are opened)” Yet the ears of our ears sleep and the eyes of our eyes remain closed unless and until it should happen that we hear the risen Lord addressing us, for his living Word alone is how our tasting touching hearing seeing breathing—lifted from the no of all nothing—merely human shall be turned toward the love that is our destiny.

God knows the turn toward love seldom happens at the appointed hour on Easter Sunday morning in a church sanctuary, no matter how beautiful the flowers, how powerful the music or how persuasive the sermon. I think this is why, when Jesus says to Mary, “Do not hold me,” I hear him saying to the church, “Do not shut me up in your sanctuaries or confine me to your creeds or confuse me with the religion or morality you believe in more than God.” “Do not hold me” he says because “he knows that all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are *than let him take us where he is going*,” Barbara Brown Taylor says. “I am going to my Father and to your Father,” he tells Mary, “to my God and to your God.” He is going to God and he is taking the whole world with him still!

Look for a moment at the detail of Mary in Giotto's fresco, her arms outstretched toward the love that is just out of reach. Then look at the space between her hands and his. “Love,” Robert Jenson says, “points not so much to something inside each of us as to something between us.” With her mind and heart and soul and strength still in the clutches of death, she is being pulled by the gravity and the grace of the love between them toward the love who is her destiny.

But more, for I tell you, he is pulling us moment by moment toward love and not death as well. You will have to say for yourself, but he is calling my name in the children of Syrian refugees, their fearful eyes meeting mine in a mission outpost of our church in Beirut; he is calling my name in the young people living fiercely and fearlessly in the face a death that stalked their friends in the classroom, that is stalking their brothers and sisters on the streets where they live; he encounters me in Malala Yousafzai as, her scared face held high, she dares to set foot in Pakistan; he addresses me through each of you as with grace and gumption you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Somehow, in these encounters, this story as my lens, I hear his voice and see his love defeating death's power, leading me, now and again, to trust that love and not death is my destiny too.

Where will his love will take us as Christ's church in this Eastertide, the season that begins the moment you walk out of those doors? Consider the disciples after they unbolt the door to that upper room and begin living as though death were behind them, as though the love-they-could-not-hold were ahead of them, just out of reach: “They stop hiding and start seeking,” Barbara Brown Taylor writes. “They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all of their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities.” They die. Some upside-down on crosses, others in the mouths of lions, others stoned or sawn in two. They live in the love that God is.

Eastertide begins a season of endings and beginnings for us, of death and new life in this community. Together let us live as if, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, we who have been destined in love from the beginning will be changed because Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed!*