

Easter Day 2024` Rev Jo Smith

Easter Day reminds us, says Richard Rohr, that our pattern of faith is always death transformed, not death avoided. We would prefer it were otherwise and yet even Christ did not avoid death. And so, no matter how in all of life's different and difficult situations we might find ourselves praying as Jesus did, "Let this cup pass from me," ours is not a faith of death avoided - ours is a faith of death transformed.

Our Easter text this morning begins this way, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb." That is how I feel on Easter Sunday - we have come together to celebrate Easter, and yet it still feels like we're still in the dark - the world is still so full of violence and injustice and suffering and yet Easter is here. Russia is still at war with Ukraine and China is rattling swords in the South Pacific and Israel and Palestine seem locked in a battle to the death and each morning we wake up to check on death - to see what new destruction humanity has wreaked in the past 24 hours - to learn where death is working swiftly and terribly . It is still darkand yet Easter is here.

Mary Magdalene rises to go to the tomb, she goes to check on death while it is still dark. But she finds that the stone has been rolled away. Mary runs to tell the other disciples what she has found - the stone is gone - the body of her Lord is gone. Peter and the beloved disciple race from where they were hiding to the tomb. They look inside. Two piles of clothes, that is all the disciples saw when they got to the tomb on that first morning—some linen wrappings on the ground and a cloth rolled up. Odd, that someone should go to all the trouble of rolling it up. John says that when the beloved disciple "saw the clothes lying there, he believed." Believed what? John does not say. He simply believed, and without another word Peter and the other disciple returned to their homes. But Mary stayed. She stayed there outside the tomb, distraught, tears beginning to fall. She stays there in the half-lit morning; she stays in the pain and discomfort and uncertainty...and that is where she meets the resurrected Christ. She remains present to what is real, to what is actually happening. She does so even when

what is real feels unbearable. And it is in staying there in the pain and uncertainty, in her willingness to be present to the awfulness and the horror and the grief, that new life comes - it is in her attending to the discomfort and turmoil that she becomes the first to see the Risen Christ. Not death avoided, but death transformed.

In my own life, I find it increasingly true that when, like Mary, I am willing to linger in and explore the hard and barren places - the places I would prefer to avoid or ignore - the places of pain where platitudes fall flat, and easy answers prove inadequate, when I am willing to be in those places- clarity, hope, and healing come. Jesus comes in that half-lit morning, and sometimes it takes a long time to recognize him. He doesn't look the way I expect him to look. And then when I get clingy, he doesn't let me cling to my old ideas, to my old ideas about him, to old ways of being in the world.

Christianity, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is the only world religion that confesses a God that suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, a God who suffers, even among Christians. We prefer that God of Christmas - a God who brings hope without death - a God who prevents suffering - only that is not the God we have got. What the cross and empty tomb teach us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and cease human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them - not from a distance but right up close. By entering into the full Easter movement - from betrayal to death to resurrection, God took the human-made wreckage of the world inside God's own body and laboured with it - a long labour, almost three days - and God did not let go of it until it was transformed and returned to us as life. Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio says, perhaps this current chaos of our world is, in a strange way, a sign of hope; that something new might be being born within. Perhaps this is the moment of a new opportunity. I have learned that the word *thura*, the ancient Greek word that is translated as a door or opening in a tomb or cave has another meaning also. It also means an opportunity or an opportune time to access new possibilities. In John's version of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene isn't only the first person to find that stone rolled away and see the risen Lord, she's also the first one to know and experience the open *thura* that means the world's horizons are infinitely expanded.

and reality will never be the same. The door has opened, the new day has arrived. Death has not been avoided but it has been transformed. The great Presbyterian preacher William Lemon said it this way: "Easter is not a passport to another world; it is a duality of perception for this one."

That is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain but to redeem it, by going through it with us. Ours is a God who didn't avoid death, but transformed it. Friends, this is the only Easter message that I can proclaim with authenticity today. It is what Frederick Buechner has called "the darkness of the resurrection itself, that morning when it was too dark to be sure what you were seeing." We are still in the midst of this shadowy place - still fumbling around in the dark. This Easter, may the Christ who rose in the darkness lead us into new life, new light, and new hope. May we dare to linger at the tomb until he calls our names and sends us forth to share his good news with the world, we have seen the Lord. And I will say, I find this extremely Good News in this moment, that our God is not the one who avoided death, but the God who transformed death. In this world and in the world to come. That is resurrection! Thanks be to God. Amen.