

Easter, 2009  
Is 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43  
John 20:1-18

Rev. Deborah Meister

Last summer, in Turkey, I came upon a sixth-century baptistry. There, cut into the floor, was a dry pool, seven feet long or so, made in the shape of a cross. Unable to resist, I went down the steps at the foot, and paused at the crossing, and came up again at the head to stand blinking in the light of the sun. I gave thanks to all those nameless Christians who had walked those steps before me. Looked across the pavement at a small white stone which marked the last resting place of St. John the Evangelist, whose Gospel we read today. Around me, the walls were ruins. But the world they made, that pool and that saint -- it goes on.

St. John of Patmos wrote, "I saw a new heavens and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'" (Rev 21:1) What we see on Easter is the dawning of that new day, the birth of a new creation.

The early Christians liked to call Easter the eighth day of the week. It was the day outside ordinary time, the one in which our humdrum life was intersected by eternity. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "This is the day the Lord has made-- a day far different from those made when the world was first created and which are measured by the passage of time. This is the beginning of a new creation."<sup>1</sup> Think of the first sunlight after a long rain, when the water lies on every leaf and twig and blade of grass, and the sun kindles them to diamonds. Even so is all creation now shot through with grace, inseparable from the redeeming love of God. What God has created, God has restored -- and ourselves, above all.

When we step into the waters of life, we step into the death and resurrection of Christ. We enter into his death at the foot of the cross; we allow ourselves to be reborn in his mighty heart; we emerge into the light of the Son of God. We offer ourselves to the shaping hands of God, consent to be made like him. Nyssa continues, "On this day is created the true man, the man made in the image and likeness of God... This day destroyed the pangs of death and brought to birth the firstborn of the dead."<sup>2</sup>

Who could have imagined that one death on a cross could do so much? Even today, we struggle to believe it. A tomb, after all, seems a strange place for birth. Certainly, when Mary Magdalene crept along the darkened roads, she thought she was going to say farewell. Be well. Thank you. I miss you. I'm sorry. Even when it all started to go wrong, she could not understand what had happened, what was happening. The tomb, opened. The body, missing. All the agonies of that horrible death, undone.

John the Evangelist tells us that the disciples took a while to understand. First Mary found the stone moved, and ran all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. Then Peter and John race to the tomb. John looked in. Peter went in. John entered and believed. John, whom Jesus loved, was most nearly complete. Peter, after his three denials, must have been, at best, ambivalent. Then they went home.

But Mary remained, weeping, and when she looked into the tomb, she saw two angels waiting for her. Had the angels come just then? Or had they been there all along, and only Mary had seen them? We do not know, but we do know this: one way or the other, they came for her. Mary Magdalene was surely the most broken of the disciples. She was the one who had been inhabited by

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<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, Easter Sermon, Oratio 1 in *Christi resurrectionem*: Jaeger IX, 277-280, 305.

<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, Easter Sermon, Oratio 1 in *Christi resurrectionem*: Jaeger IX, 277-280, 305.

seven demons, the one cast out from the rest of her people. Even among Christ's closest companions, she was the one who knew she needed Jesus, the one who most needed new life.

Of course the angels came for her. They come for each one of us when we have come to the end of our powers, bearing new life for us whenever we are willing to lay down the old one. When we are exhausted and broken with grief, when our plans are in ruins and our relationships shattered, then are we willing to grope for a power that is beyond our own, for a life that is not yet ours. Then do we have ears to hear the voice that is calling us each by name: Mary! Amelia! Max! Zane! Come! There is new life just beyond this door!! The tomb is "the workshop of resurrection,"<sup>3</sup> because the emptiness of our failures is the place of new birth, in this life and the next. The Lord will take away our dis-grace<sup>4</sup>, our un-grace, and restore us to himself again.

If you read in the Scripture the stories of the Resurrection and keep on going, you will see that what happened did not happen only to Jesus. Somehow, in the dark days around Christ's death, his disciples were reborn as well. Headstrong, impetuous Peter became a solid rock (who'd have thought it?). Mary Magdalene found courage to declare that she, the outcast, had seen God. Those eleven unlettered fishermen stood up to councils, preached in public, worked miracles, traveled halfway around the known world, so that everyone might know the victory of our God. Somehow, the risen life of Christ became something they could tap into, even here, even now. They practiced resurrection hope. And so can we.

What you were really saying when you were baptized, what you continue to say every time you reach out to God, is Yes. Yes, I want to live. Yes, I want to know joy. Yes, I want to be a child of God. And the good news of Easter is that God has gone before you, preparing a world that is fit to receive your hope. There are times when things are not the way we want them to be, when it feels as if maybe we were meant to be someplace else, living some other life. We were, and God is creating that place even now. God is working in you and in all the dark places of the earth to bring forth a creation more wonderful than any we have known, our last, best, and truest home.

But, my friends, God does not intend to undertake this work alone. When God created us in his own image, male and female, he created us to be partners in the ongoing work of creation. We are the ones who are to tend God's garden, cut back the weeds and nourish even the frailest bloom. Desmond Tutu urges us on, saying, "we must have the calm assurance and patience that faith can give us. But ... we must not be patient with oppression, with hunger, with violence. We must work to bring the time when history is ready for all people to be free, to be fed, and to live in peace, because as God's partners, we help to determine the time frame in which God's plan unfolds and God's dream is realized."<sup>5</sup> Easter is meant to be liberation for all people, and if there are places where the new creation seems slow to come, still, we do what we can to bring it into being.

Sir Stanley Spencer's brave painting, *The Resurrection: Cookham*, imagines the general resurrection as if it were happening in twentieth-century England.<sup>6</sup> Outside a stone church with roses growing over the door, a graveyard has been reduced to chaos, all its tombs broken open, its ordered stones strewn slant-wise on the grass. From each one emerges a man or woman: workmen in their overalls, businessmen in suits, a nun in her habit, a soldier still in uniform, others, naked and golden in the sun. The thing about it is, they look so ordinary. And they are. Just average men and

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<sup>3</sup> St. Athanasius.

<sup>4</sup> Is 25:8.

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, 126.

<sup>6</sup> If you would like to see the Spencer painting, an image of it is available at: [http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2375/2371112872\\_25962618eb\\_o.jpg](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2375/2371112872_25962618eb_o.jpg). (Or, you can find other links through Google images.)

women, young and old, people of no distinction in their lives, save only one. At some point, they had stepped into the waters of life. At one key moment, their heart turned over and they yearned to believe in the Son of God. And so the Son of God has not forgotten them, and he will not forget you.

At the end of time, you will stand blinking in the light of the same sun that rose on Easter morning, through which the dull earth spins daily, moving through darkness and light until the darkness is gone forever. On that day, you will be yourself, fully, truly, and irrevocably yourself. You will look like yourself. But you will also look like Christ. That's the beauty of it: the glory of God now lives in you, tightly coiled, like a seed, bearing fruit to eternal life.