

Easter is a blaze of light such as we never see anywhere else. Everything begins in the uncertain, mottled light of dawn, between day and night, between life and death. It begins in those waking shadows where we're not sure in which world we are or whether we're still alive, or whether the fullness of life is possible anymore. As Easter dawns, we go from dimly lit back hall to sundrenched and shimmering summer shore. Easter's searing new light is so bright our eyes can barely focus.

The Easter dawn between shadows and light reminds me of a Cape Cod woman, a mother to a baby. She has a nasty headache. Rarely ill, she doesn't know what to do. She takes an aspirin and rests on the couch. Unexpectedly, her heartbeat slows and stops. Her breathing falters. "What's happening to me?" She comes and goes between two worlds, one with pain and one without. She sees fear on her husband's face. "Call 911." She sees a cross on a firefighter's hat. She rides in an ambulance, inhaling oxygen. But mostly she visits places she'd never been.

Physically, you're in peril, but your spirit doesn't feel fear. No, it's more like adventure, exploring new terrain. You even revel in the excitement of it, unafraid. You travel in a spiral to another place. Then you're outside your body observing yourself. You laugh, "My goodness, so this is dying? Will I see my mother?" You feel yourself rising to the ceiling. You wonder where to from there. You hear your grandmother's voice: "Mary, you must go back. Your small baby still needs you."

This woman died clinically several times within a short span, but revived to live 40 more years. Receiving this rare experience as a gift, she shared it by working with AIDS sufferers back when very few did so; by working with hospice, sharing her unique story with the dying, people eager to hear it. As she told me her story, I couldn't help but notice the painting in her home: Jesus in the garden with Mary. Fra Angelico's *Noli Me Tangere*, meaning, *Do not touch me*. How fitting is that?

What does it all mean? Big question. One lesson is sure. A time comes for us all when we can't do for ourselves; when a powerful, gracious presence takes over, gentle and strong. God showing up in that dicey moment authenticates our faith.

Maybe our "Holy Other" can't physically hold us, like Jesus cannot clutch Mary or that grandmother her dying granddaughter. But God's spiritual embrace as we're weak and vulnerable is who God is and what he brings us when it matters most. And that is the best news I could ever declare from this pulpit today or anywhere.

If we realized in our daily waking hours how fragile life is and how fine is the line between this world and the world to come, we would live our lives very differently. If we realized how strong God becomes for us when we are at our weakest, we'd live more boldly. If we realized how close and available God is as we need God the most, we'd be less afraid. Now we are ready to hear from the Gospel of John.

Enter Mary Magdalene in the dreamlike dark before dawn. Mary was picking up the little pieces in Jesus' shattered movement, trudging more than walking to his grave. From afar, something looked amiss. Someone had rolled away the stone? Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse someone had taken Jesus away. But where? To a steep cliff? To the town dump? And why? Did they still fear Jesus so much in death, that he would become a martyr, and his grave a shrine? Jesus' body was all that was left, all she had. Don't tell Mary that is gone as well.

Mary ran to bring others back with her. They came, then left her behind, weeping. Her muffled, desperate sound was like a loyal pet crushed by its master's death, rooted to the last place he had been, paralyzed, not knowing what to do next.

We know Mary was in deep, agonized throes when she can look at two angels, arrayed at the head and foot of where Jesus had been, like paintings we've seen. And it was totally lost upon her. "Why are you weeping?" they asked the mute, sobbing woman. "They have taken away my Lord," she answered, oblivious, "and I don't know where they have laid him." Mary was so numb it didn't occur to her that the two might be the culprits, or they could also be angels from heaven.

Mary left the cave and bumped into the gardener. Have you ever spoken to someone—say, a store clerk or bank teller--and you were so obsessed with what you wanted, you didn't notice or acknowledge who they were? So Mary said, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him." Did she really mean that? How exactly would that work? Did she expect to pick Jesus up by herself? Or that the gardener would drape him over her shoulders? "Mary," he said. She turned, stared, and saw. "Rabbuni," she cried, "My teacher!"

So was it with Jesus and Mary like a heartfelt reunion with dear old friends? After not seeing them across wide spans of time or tectonic shifts in living, we'll say, "We picked right up where from we had left off." Was that how it was with them? Actually, no, it was not. "Mary, do not hold on to me," he said. "Don't cling to me."

Mary wanted everything familiar again. That would be less frightening. But there was no going back to before. Everything had changed. Jesus was not on his way back to them, but off to his Father. Well-done, good and faithful servant! Jesus' stopovers were temporary, only long enough to certify that good is stronger than evil; love swallows up hatred; forgiveness outshines revenge; and life has the final word over death. He was with them only long enough to show God ultimately does reign over all things, despite the countervailing evidence, daily in the news.

Jesus wasn't returning to them but visiting to underscore his taking us to God. A homecoming to earthly life would've been easier than blazing trails unto eternity. New life is frightening. We lack a category in which to put something so great as "resurrection". It's not natural. It's not at all like daffodils springing from the earth. That *is* natural. But nothing is *less* natural than a body leaving a tomb under its own power. That is why the risen Jesus greets them: "Don't be afraid." "Fear not."

Did you ever see a mother cat transport her kittens? She firmly but gently grips the kitten's neck skin in her jaws. The kitten goes completely slack. That is how we receive the gift of resurrection. It is not our doing, but God's. We must let God do this for us. The only thing we can't do is hang on to the old life, to cling to the Jesus before his death or ours, or pine after how things used to be. Make no mistake, friends, this lifetime is a proving ground for our place in the eternal. We can move mountains, soften hatred, live brave and serene lives, erase squalor and ignorance, but at that moment clinging to the past won't do. We cannot hold Jesus back in pre-resurrection faith. We enter with Jesus into in post-Easter faith.

As we go with Mary Magdalene from a familiar world to one unfamiliar, two things happen. First, we finally realize that it is not all up to us. It *is* all up to God, who ask us all to help him. And God is more than equal to the challenge, thank you very much. Are there places in your life where you need to relinquish, where you need to let go so that God might somehow transform and resurrect those places?

Second, if we resist keeping Jesus where we are, but instead let him take us where he's going, he'll hold us. And letting him take hold of us, he won't forsake or abandon us. Where will he take us? Jesus will usher us into God's presence.

That's all heaven is, whether we live in this world or the world to come, living in God's presence. Finally, it's this simple--God is the Embracer, we are the embraced. So today I declare the victory of God's promises. And I rededicate myself to God's way over my ways. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

John 20:1-18

“THE EMBRACER, THE EMBRACED”

Easter, 2018

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister
The First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

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