

The Church of the Holy Cross  
Easter Day, 2013  
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### **The Problem With Easter**

One of the world's leading Jesus scholars, Marcus Borg, was questioning Methodist bishop and former professor and dean of Duke University, Will Willimon, of all things about the meaning of Easter morning. Marcus asked, "Will, why do you need a supernaturally resurrected body of Jesus to make your faith work?" And Will responded, "Marcus, I don't need a resurrected Jesus. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I want a resurrected Jesus. In fact, if I got one, it would be a real nuisance for me, personally. I've got a good life, I've figured out how to work the world, on the whole, to the advantage of me and my friends and my family. My health is good, everybody close to me is doing fine. I have the illusion that I'm in control, that I am making a so-significant contribution to help Jesus that I may be eternal on my own. No, I don't need a bodily resurrected Jesus. In fact, if I ever got one, my life would only become more difficult." The conversation between the two men apparently ended abruptly here.

In a conversation last week with a friend of mine, the friend asked me how I could possibly preach on Easter, especially with all that's going on in the world: "I feel sorry for you," he said with a chuckle: "I mean, that resurrection business: it's just so unreasonable." And he is right: Easter is God's unreasonable surprise to a world that has adjusted to death. "Get real, Smedley"; that's what he was really saying—I know, I've felt it at times myself. But "Get real" translated into today's Scripture means "adjust to death."

The stone rolled away from the tomb and the absence of a dead body does not make life easier for us. "Easy" would be the women going to the tomb with their spices on that Sunday morning and finding a body to anoint. But now we have the two men in dazzling clothes scaring the women, scolding them for coming to care for their friend's body: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they ask. "He is not here, he is risen—don't you remember what he told you?" Bishop Willimon is right: This Easter business is getting messy now, complicated, difficult, out of control.

Will you just "get real" and adjust to death? This is the path of least resistance. The problem with the Easter story, the difficulty of Jesus' whole body being risen to new life, is that it picks away at the shell we have created to protect ourselves from the real grief of it all. Over time the shell gets more and more calcified, but it's not because we are bad people—it's because the grief is too much.

The women who go to the tomb at first light just want to pay their respects in the way they had been taught to do—and because of their love for their Lord. In John's Gospel the angels interrogate Mary Magdalene who is weeping outside the tomb: "Woman," they ask, "Why are you weeping?" And I can't help thinking: "For God's sake let the woman weep--If there's any time to weep it's here at the tomb." But that's just the problem with Easter resurrection: it interrupts a perfectly good cry.

That's why we go to the tomb in our life, isn't it? We just want to be the dutiful child, the responsible parent, the helpful friend, the good Christian, the caring person. Those women understand crucifixion--they get it—and we do too. Lord knows, when we let ourselves take just a fraction of it in, we see crucifixion everywhere we turn. Life is difficult; people are struggling with real struggles; loss is real.

What makes Jesus' rising from the dead so strange for me is not that it happens, but that it happens in such a harsh, unsentimental way. When the two men in dazzling clothes speak to the women in this Easter story, it's not even close to a Hallmark moment. There is no "Thank you for coming—isn't this just beautiful?" No soft pastel card with a phrase like "Blessings for a fun spring day!" Instead just, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here." You wonder if God got the memo on how much we don't like change.

We have been sold one story for so long, some of us have even trained ourselves to expect the worst and then of course to be so compassionate, so pastoral when the worst happens. The women were doing all these things so well when they arrive at dawn to wash the wounds, anoint the body of their beloved Jesus. Death was the system they understood and knew how to deal with. They had adjusted to it. Going to the tomb helped them cope with the loss, the grief of it all. But then these dazzling characters who disrupt all their good intentions, all the whispered reverence, not to mention the nostalgic moment. God surprises with a new beginning, and it's so unreasonable. God disrupts our order, disorients us with new life, injects new possibility--and now what are we going to do if we can't do our usual work. On Easter morning nothing is where it's supposed to be. And I wonder, is it joy or sorrow those women feel in that moment?

The truth is, we like our routines, even if they revolve around our adjustment to death. My friend's objection to Easter reveals his natural preference for an old order that he understands to some new order that doesn't make sense, that disorients--and that rings true for me too.

Oh yes, there is a problem with Easter. It's a real nuisance, just makes your life more difficult. Once you go changing your assumption about the absolute power of death, once you open this door, Easter makes you demand the reasons for every school shooting as if it were your child who attended that school on that day. Easter makes you demand an answer for every force that corrupts and destroys human life: personal, economic, social, religious—every force that crushes the fullness of human life, every prejudice that strips away human dignity, every assumption that the bombing in that region is just the way it is, that war is of course a natural part of human history, that violence is of course a necessary part of the human condition.

Once you open up the possibility of life prevailing, of healing being possible, of breaking the pattern of addiction, of growth in the church instead of decline, of joy overcoming despair, of God's delight in you instead of God's anger with you, of God's desire that you and every human being experience a life fully lived instead of a life cut short or heavy with guilt...once you open this Easter door, what a slippery slope to all heaven breaking loose.