

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

EASTER DAY

SUNDAY 4 APRIL 2010

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John 20: 1-18

"Easter – Turning to New Life"

1. Remained entombed yet resurrected!

Joan Chittister reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus leaves us with a question of our own resurrection. Jesus has left the tomb constructed for him by life's suffering, by the fear of death, by his friends and his intimate community who betrayed him, and by the religious and political institutions. Joan Chittister notes:

The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own [tombs], leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted and politicians condemned. It is the greatest question of them all in a world that practices religion as an act of private devotion and sees law and government as an arm of God. It requires rising again from the notion of piety as a justification, an excuse, for pietism. [\[i\]](#)

We remain entombed, and can only experience partial transformation when we hold rigidly to our own interpretation of the events of Easter. When we demand others accept what we believe: as to who God is in this, to what happened, to who Jesus is, to a material resurrection, or to an over-dependence on a narrow view of science, or to whatever theory we have.

To be strongly defensive and judgemental because others believe differently is to remain entombed and closed to the transformative power of God's new truth and life. The Gospels and Paul struggled to grapple with what happened and how to image and witness to this mystery of the resurrection of Jesus.

As the theologian John Cobb tells us,

For neither Jesus nor Paul was there an idea of God sacrificing Jesus in order to atone for human sins or to ransom us from the devil's power. But those ideas, too, have some foothold in the Bible. [\[ii\]](#)

Each ongoing century applied their own forms of discourse and intellectual frameworks. Each era tried to be faithful and from our 21st century perspective, certain eras were extremely inaccurate, such as the exchange theory, where Jesus' death appeased the Devil.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares what the miracle of Easter is for her:

Those appearances cinch [make certain] the resurrection for me, not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the gardener said, "Mary!" and she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening -- not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living [Christ]. [\[iii\]](#)

2. Turning to life and hope only by facing ignorance and suffering

Turning from death to life is the title of a brilliant article on Mary Magdalene by Dorothy Lee, the UCA New Testament scholar[\[iv\]](#). I want to reformulate some of her key points.

The Greek verb “*to turn*” is a key image for John in our resurrection story. Here, we witness, that Easter faith emerges only when we engage in a “turning” at many levels.

Dorothy Lee notes that Mary Magdalene *turns to face* the resurrected Jesus without recognising him. In my reformulated terms, she cannot see him in his new state; she only sees what her discourse allows her to see. She sees *her* Jesus, the one she just witnessed, unjustly charged with treason, brutally beaten and crucified! She carries her Jesus wrapped in her experience and self-understanding.

Yet, as Dorothy Lee reminds us,

This gospel's main concern is the revelation of God's saving glory and the human response of faith, signifying the turning from darkness to light, from death to life.[\[v\]](#)

Her **first point** is that Mary turns towards suffering and death, the right place to search for Easter faith and the resurrected Jesus. Mary is the first to come to the tomb after the day Jesus is crucified. Then, after she has witnessed to the empty tomb and Peter and the beloved disciple come with her to see it and believe, though they don't understand, what does she do? She stays there, in her sorrow, expressing her feelings of pain, allowing herself to sit in her believing-yet-doubting. Unless we do that, we take the tomb with us!

Her emphasis *re-turns* us to our recently undertaken Lenten journey, to the spirituality of discernment that the Enneagram provides.

Without turning to face the one, we cannot encounter the other; in Calvin's words, "without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God"... Yet self-knowing is also divine gift as well as human struggle: "without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self". In John's gospel, it is the Revealer who reveals both divine and human knowledge to the one who is "thirsty" for life (4:13-14; 7:37-39). Such knowledge is spiritual, but it encompasses every aspect of our lives: spiritual and material, soul and body, sexual, psychological, personal, political. And because it is ultimately a divine gift, this knowing springs from love, not judgmentalism or harsh moralism. It leads to a self-acceptance that (paradoxically) makes possible both self- and social transformation.[\[vi\]](#)

Turning to the place of our own pain brings us in touch with the pain of the world around us. Of our friends, family, community, but also a world beyond our affluent and comfortable Western world. We need to recognise that our middle class life is shielded and sanitised from the world's poverty. Easter faith enables us to process the depths of our own pain and at the same time to see the suffering of the poor throughout the world.

3. Easter faith, Paradise renewed: turning to life, transforming life turning to us

When we realise that John creates the setting for the Passion of Jesus in John 18 in a *garden*, and

then in this chapter, John 20, the first resurrection appearance in a *garden*, we sense a powerful image at work. John is referring back to the Garden of Eden story. Yet this time, John suggests that with Passion and resurrection appearances, Paradise is under reconstruction! The word *garden* is an image of a new world emerging!

Dorothy Lee's **second point** is that Mary Magdalene's *turn towards* pain and death, her staying with the uncomfortable and disturbing, leads her to discover the risen Christ.

I shared on Good Friday how my mother wept and wept when she heard and read the story of Jesus' last days and his death. She felt Jesus could understand her suffering. Her weeping allowed her to express and stay with the unbearable pain of our home life. And staying there she met the risen Christ whose voice she heard, and led her to joy and hope, even though life was still difficult at home!

In turning to her pain and then turning to Jesus as she stays there, she enters the deep reality of life and its struggles. She is the one, to use the OT image of the one who seeks Wisdom, who has lost, searched for and finally found the One who has suffered with her, who is the power of life. She is commissioned to witness to this emerging new humanity in relationship with God. And integral to this witness is gender equality. It is a Jewish woman, and not Peter, who is sent out to share this good news.

Dorothy Lee cautions us not to romanticise Mary's journey of Easter faith. It involved struggle, missing the significance of signs, even misrecognising the Risen Christ for a gardener!

In the fourth gospel, it takes growth and maturation to make this journey; and growth signifies a dynamic process, an ability to learn from mistakes, a refusal to be paralyzed by guilt and fear. In this sense, conversion is life-long, a constant turning back and turning towards.[\[vii\]](#)

Thirdly, Dorothy Lee emphasises that Mary Magdalene's turning face her struggles, and then turning to rediscover Jesus as the Risen One, "is dependent on God's prior movement towards the world (3:16)".[\[viii\]](#) I prefer to use the term interdependent. I believe there is a deep sense in humanity to relate to that which we call God, the power of life, which equally seeks to be in relationship with us. Of course, we can be not only distant from the sense of the divine, but also as distant from the deep beauty and sense of our own self and humanity!

Fourthly, there is another turning that Dorothy Lee expresses in a powerful theological notion, that "God is already turning within Godself": The Word was in the beginning towards God (1:2)"[\[ix\]](#). Jurgen Moltmann took this notion and applied it to the passion and suffering of God as God the Parent experienced the humiliation and death, and has been forever marked as the crucified God, through the empathic suffering with the crucified risen Christ.[\[x\]](#)

And then, **fifthly**, Mary's cry of faith, joy and hope out of grief and pain turned back to the community, the world and creation.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I want to remind you of Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Resurrection*, which I referred to last Easter, and which provides some profound insights about the process of resurrection, or as Tolstoy describes it, of being re-born to lead a more meaningful life.

Practicing a resurrection life is a life-long process of learning and growing to understand humanity

and ourselves. In his book, *Resurrection*, Tolstoy narrates the story of a young nobleman Nekhlyudov who had seduced Maslova when she was a young servant girl. Years later he encounters her as a prostitute, in court on a charge of theft. This book explores the process of dealing with guilt and conscience, with the process of resurrection of fallen humanity. But the process of entering a new life was filled with anxieties, false starts, insincerities and learnings. Nekhlyudov's anguished discovery of how he had ruined Maslova's life produced a desire to purge his soul!

But how? By using his social power to secure her a pardon. Then he wanted to marry her and follow her to Siberia.

She refuses: "You want to save yourself through me. You had your pleasure from me in this world, and you want to get your salvation through me in the next world".

Nekhlyudov turns to Maslova but does not see her! Or the real pain he caused her, or his own self and misguided desires!

We can all be like this! Not realising: Who am I and what desires motivate me to act like this? These are questions of spirituality. What new life has Nekhlyudov really gained in respect of his self-and-other understanding?

As Harriet Lerner in her book, *The Dance of Intimacy*, would ask of someone like Nekhlyudov: is he overfunctioning, underfunctioning, fighting, pursuing, distancing, child-focusing or other-focusing .[\[xi\]](#)

Tolstoy's novel tells the story about a person in whom new life was growing only as he honestly engaged with the complex and contradictory realities of his deceptions, manipulations as well as acts of love for the other, in acts of respectful justice and true self-giving.

He concludes his novel:

That night an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov, not so much because he entered new conditions of life, but because everything that had happened to him from that time on was endowed with an entirely different meaning for him. How this new chapter of his life will end, the future will show.

[\[i\]](#) Joan Chittister, **Easter calls us to resurrection - our own**. *National Catholic Reporter*, April 6, 2001

[\[ii\]](#) John Cobb, <http://www.processandfaith.org/askcobb/2006/04-redemption.shtml>

[\[iii\]](#) Barbara Brown Taylor, **Escape From the Tomb**, *Christian Century*, April 1, 1998, p 339.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=640>

[\[iv\]](#) Dorothy A. Lee, **Turning from death to life: a biblical reflection on Mary Magdalene - John 20:1-18**. "Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope": Unfolding the Eighth Assembly Theme. *Ecumenical Review*, April, 1998

[\[v\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[vi\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[vii\]](#) *Op cit.*

[\[viii\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[ix\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[x\]](#) Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

[\[xi\]](#) Harriet G Lerner, *The Dance of Intimacy*, p34.