

John 20:1-10 (NRSV)

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mt 28.1—10; Mk 16.1—8; Lk 24.1—12)

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Empty Tomb, Vanishing Reprisal

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: April 8, 2007

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *John 20:1-10*

John the evangelist is the Ernest Hemingway of the Gospel writers. His theology may be complex and subtle. But his story-telling is a burst of short and simple sentences. It takes a special kind of brilliance to tell stories in this way. There is nothing flowery to get in the way, but there's nothing to cover any weakness in the writer's skill, either. So, in short, direct staccato John gives us the picture of that first Easter morning.

Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty. She reports to the disciples. Peter and the one identified only enigmatically as the one Jesus loved ran to the tomb. Peter got there first and looked in. Then the other one. The second one believed. And then John ends the story with utter economy. He says, "Then the disciples returned to their homes." That's it. No shouts of, "He is risen." No trumpets and organ. No Easter dinner. They looked in; one believed; they returned to their homes.

The stories of the empty tomb pervade the Gospel accounts of Easter morning. The whole Gospel of Mark ends at that point. Luke and Matthew tell the disciples that Jesus will appear to them in Galilee. In John this morning's reading is followed by that lovely interchange between Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus in which she starts out mistaking him for the gardener. But in all of them the mystery of the empty tomb takes center stage. It is meant to speak to us.

The first message it conveys, of course, is that Jesus is not there. Matthew suggests that at least some people will say that the body was stolen, that it was a trick. But most will see a miracle. The point of the stories is that Jesus who was dead, and who was laid in the tomb on Friday, is no longer dead and in the tomb on Sunday. As he promised, he has risen, which brings us, ultimately, to sing our Easter alleluias.

But if we probe just a little deeper, we face the question, So, Jesus rose on Easter morning; what does it mean for us? And here the Gospels are less straightforward than we may realize. The regular answer goes something like, Jesus broke the bonds of death and guaranteed us life after death. Because he rose, paved the way as it were, or because by dying he saved us from our sins, we are no longer sentenced to death at the end of life. There is some truth in this, I am sure. But that can't really be the whole thing. First of all, already in Jesus' time there were many who believed in life after death or resurrection of the dead. It wasn't a brand new idea. It wasn't as if everyone were certain that life ended in death, and then Jesus came along and gave everyone the chance for eternal life.

Even more to the point, Jesus makes very little of this idea of following him to obtain afterlife. Jesus is much more concerned with our current living. The Gospel of John summarizes the whole point of his book by saying that Jesus did all the things he did so "that believing you may have life in his name." Christians have historically added their own already-held convictions onto this rather simple sentence from John. They have assumed that Jesus

meant that they were to believe in him as their personal savior. However, throughout the Gospel of John it is quite clear that what Jesus wants his followers to believe is that his idea of the way to live and be in the world is the right way. So when he says that he wants people to believe that they may have life in his name, he is saying that he wants people to understand the rightness of his message and that so understanding, they will find wholeness in life. Quite a different emphasis from believe in me, and I will reward you with a place in heaven.

So, what's the minister doing this morning? Is he trying to take the winds out of the Easter sails? Should we dress the sanctuary back in black, if the resurrection isn't about life eternal? Not at all. Life eternal is in the message, to be sure. But Jesus is up to something different from what we may think. He's not saying, "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours: believe in my and I'll reward you with heaven." Instead he is offering us a way of living and believing that will make the transition from life to death much more seamless. For to believe in Jesus in the way he means for us to, will mean that this life will become more like the eternity to which we are headed. As Paul later says, we will taste the first fruits. Jesus says he promises life, not just life after this life.

That brings us back to the simple telling of the story of Easter morning. It brings us back to the empty tomb that Mary and the disciples saw.

In human history a tomb has been a dangerous thing, or at least a tomb in which lies the body of a martyr. My good friend Gordon McMullan grew up in Belfast Ireland. It was in that embattled city that he served as priest and finally for a quarter of a century as bishop, the Bishop of Belfast in the Protestant Church of Ireland. Imagine that position over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Over those years Gordon saw first-hand the senseless devastation of sectarian violence. All too frequently the caskets of young men, women and children killed in the bloodshed came through the doors of his churches. Such pain and such loss.

A couple of years ago Gordon said these words to me. He said, "In all the world the most dangerous thing is a martyr and a myth about the martyr." Gordon was reflecting on the reality that the tombs of the martyrs were the seed-bed from which sprouted the incendiary motivation for vengeance and the gasoline to bring the new fires raging.

The Clancy Brothers, an Irish singing group, sing a song, "The Patriot Game," that makes the point:

**My name is O'Hanlon, and I'm just gone sixteen.
My home is in Monaghan, where I was weaned.
I learned all my life cruel England to blame,
And so I'm a part of the patriot game.**

**It's barely two years since I wandered away
With the local battalion of the bold IRA,
I'd read of our heroes, and I wanted the same
To play out my part in the patriot game.**

**They told me how Connolly was shot in a chair,
His wounds from the battle all bleeding and bare,
His fine body twisted, all battered and lame,
They soon made him part of the patriot game.**

And so Connolly's memory as the victim who needs vengeance to make his plight right becomes the rallying cry for an ideology of vengeance. A martyr and a myth. A tomb with a victim. They fuel the flame.

Think also of Germany in the twenties and early thirties. In World War I Germany had experienced humiliating defeat. Even more humiliating was the treaty of Versailles, which put in place conditions that were meant to leave Germany forever powerless. In this climate Adolph Hitler found the fertile ground for the National Socialist Party, the Nazis. Time and again Hitler pointed to the graves and the humiliation of World War I and exclaimed, "Never again, never again, will the German people face this humiliation." Out of the graves of the martyrs and the myth of their heroics in the face of humiliation, Hitler mobilized one of the most brutal regimes in human history. Millions of Jews—men, women and children—who somehow became the scapegoats for all that had befallen the Germany, were murdered in a chorus of righteous and holy hatred. The tombs of the fallen and humiliated martyrs fanned the flames of hatred and justified unspeakable retribution.

Gil Bailie, in his book *Violence Unveiled*, has given us a most interesting account of the place of the tomb of the aggrieved victim. He is a follower of the French anthropologist, Rene Gerard. Bailie writes:

"There is no culture without a tomb and no tomb without a culture," writes Girard; "in the end the tomb is the first and only cultural symbol."¹

If speaking in these terms seems strange, one need only glance at the newspaper to see how casually and habitually the tombs of victims are turned into sacred justifications for more victimization. The July 8, 1992, edition of the New York Times, for instance, carried a story about the fierce ethnic fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave of Azerbaijan. The story begins by quoting a notice posted in a building in Armenia where assistance for the Nagorno-Karabakh partisans was organized. The notice read:

All those who hold dear the graves of our ancestors, our churches and our holies, must sow terror on the foe. By day and by night, they must perish.

Whether one is living in the ancient world or the modern one, in order to "sow terror on the foe" night and day one must go mad. If the terror can be sanctified, if the violence can be experienced as holy, and if the esprit de corps of those sowing the terror can achieve religious intensity, then the madness can pass for lucidity itself. The "father of lies" of which the author of John's Gospel speaks is the force that converts the graves of those killed violently into the solemn obligation to unleash violence on others. To paraphrase Howard Nemerov, the tomb is where murders become memories and memories become the beautiful obligations.

One of the most graphic of the recent instances of this was ably recounted in Robert D. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*. Kaplan writes of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic: "The only Eastern European Communist leader in the late 1980s who managed to save himself and his party from collapse did so by making a direct appeal to racial hatred." ... Let me just quote the first two paragraphs of the Tina Rosenberg review of Kaplan's

¹Girard, René. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 83.

book that appeared in the March 28, 1993, edition of the Washington Post Book World.² Rosenberg writes:

On June 28, 1987, an ambitious Serbian Communist leader came to a field in Kosovo called Kosovo Polje, the Field of Black Birds, on the anniversary of the defeat there of a Serbian commander. "They'll never do this to you again," he pleaded to the crowd. "Never again will anyone defeat you." That was the moment, writes Robert D. Kaplan, when the Serbian revolt against the Yugoslav federation began. The speaker was Slobodan Milosevic. The defeat commemorated on that field took place in 1389.

A year later, the coffin of the defeated Serb commander began a yearlong pilgrimage through every village in Serbia, followed by multitudes of sobbing mourners dressed in black in each town. For many in Serbia, the year 1989 marked not the fall of communism, but the 600th anniversary of the defeat of Knez Lazar at Kosovo Polje.³

Bailie writes later:

Tombs have precisely the opposite effect that the crowing of the cock had on Peter in the passion story. The crowing cock made Peter conscious of the fact that he had been swept into complicity with those who murdered Jesus. Tombs function to extinguish precisely that recognition of complicity. By decorating the tombs of past victims, those morally troubled by acts of collective violence can bemoan the violence and shift responsibility for it to others without having either to acknowledge or to renounce their own complicity in the violence. The interpretation becomes the next room of the dream, the dream from which Peter awoke upon hearing the cock crow. ...

The empty tomb is essential for understanding the resurrection, not because it announced the resurrection, but because it deprived those who were later to experience the resurrection of a cathartic religious ritual that might have substituted for it. The discovery of the empty tomb meant that Jesus' corpse and its resting place could not be made into a shrine and become the locus for a new religious cult. ...

Given the significance of the empty tomb, nothing symbolizes Christianity's apostasy in history as perfectly as do the Crusades, that cluster of sacrificial convulsions that essentially brought "Europe" as a cultural phenomenon into existence. Pope Urban B launched the First Crusade by passionately imploring European Christendom to arm for the task of reclaiming from the infidel the sepulcher of Christ. This sacred mission remained the supreme rallying cry for all the subsequent Crusades. In other words, Christianity's most notorious revival of sacred violence involved a repudiation of the story of the empty tomb and a more or less spontaneous revival of the structures of sacred violence whose perversities

²Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 39.

³Bailie, Gil, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), pp. 228-233.

the crucifixion had exposed.⁴

One could certainly argue that the revived structures of sacred violence are still alive and well. And so it is crucial that we make the trip to the grave on Easter morning and find it empty. Empty because Jesus has risen. Yes, empty in a signal of our own coming resurrection. But surely not least important because it contains not the body of a fallen hero who calls us to unspeakable acts in his name. The one we came to find had already told us, “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” As proof, he is not there. There is no martyr. He whom we seek has gone ahead to Galilee, and he has left word for us to follow after him. To follow him always, and in all ways. Amen.

⁴Ibid