

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – When Everything Changed Easter - April 4, 2021 - John 20:1-18

Whatever the season, you can find her there. Seated at the highest point, amid unobstructed views, she casts her gaze in the direction of his eventual return. In fairer weather, when others come and go, her attention is diverted for a time. A chipmunk dives into his burrow with cheeks packed full. An Eastern grey squirrel scampers along the fence line. And a showy, American cardinal lures would-be predators away from the nest.

While I do not know how she feels about these occasional visitors, it is clear that nothing compares with grand reunion. And when he finally returns, she welcomes him home in waves of affirmation. Weighing only eleven pounds, she is quick and nimble. And racing toward him at top speed, she launches herself into the arms of our oldest son who ably navigates this trust exercise. Without speaking a word, the bond between boy and dog is sealed.

Oftentimes, we like to think of Easter like this. Bathed in light, joy, and flowers, this is a day of angelic voices and of photos ops from brunch posted online.

¹ Yet, as Scott Johnston reminds us, “the first Easter wasn’t a victory lap. It wasn’t

¹ Scott Black Johnston, “Empty,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2021, 31.

confetti and applause. It wasn't a celebration at all. The first Easter dawned on a world saturated with fear, ringed by death, shaken by God, and blessed by the loving actions of a few brave souls. All of which is to say, the *first* Easter was a lot like *this* Easter” which we now encounter in the midst of pandemic.²

At every turn, Easter engages the senses. The harsh brutality of the cross gives way to the stench of the tomb. And yet, even in death, Jesus is not forgotten. Early on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene arrives to anoint his body - her arms overflowing with perfume and spices.

Oddly, things are not as she expects them. And with the stone visibly removed from the entrance of the tomb, Mary does not linger there. Instead, she runs. And with her feet, she communicates a message of fear and foreboding, of stress, exhaustion, and grief. With hurried steps, Mary reminds us that some emotions are best expressed in movement. Her eyes, now fighting back tears, guide her way to the other disciples. And when she finally reaches them, Mary offers a breathless and partial testimony that they strain to understand.

² Johnston, 31.

Like many eye witnesses of trauma, Mary struggles to accurately describe and interpret what she has seen. Assuming that grave robbers have stolen Jesus' corpse, she maintains, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Mary is the first of many witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. And yet, seeing has not translated into believing.

Our spiritual ancestors recognized this challenge. This is why they distinguished between the physical act of seeing and the interpretive work of vision. For them, vision "involved intuition, imagination, the mind, and the heart."³ They believed that people could see with their eyes, their heart, and even their flesh.

Mary Magdalene is shattered. She "suffers the terror of crucifixion Friday, the stress of Roman imperialism, and pain of persecution associated with being a follower of Jesus. These experiences are seared into her mind and upon her flesh." Understandably, she views the empty tomb through lenses of anxiety and fear.⁴

When she reaches the other disciples, Mary unloads the burden of her testimony. And as she pauses to catch her breath, other disciples are soon on the

³ Jonathan L. Walton, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 191.

⁴ Walton, 191.

move. The text tells us that Peter and the beloved disciple “were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.” When the two looked inside and saw the linen wrappings lying there, they “believed.”

American Sign Language or ASL is one of the primary modes of communication for those with hearing impairment. Importantly, ASL engages the entire body. For this reason, many claim that it provides a deeper, more emotive experience than words alone.

In a recent film, the Pakistani-born actor Riz Ahmed plays a drummer who goes deaf. While preparing for the role, Ahmed immersed himself in deaf culture and worked with a deaf advocate to learn American Sign Language. That experience forever changed his understanding of communication, and reminded him of how easily and how often the hearing community hides behind words.⁵

The story of the resurrection is an embodied narrative. Embodied in Jesus, yes, but it is also embodied in Mary, in Peter, and in the beloved disciple, as well. Each time that this message is shared, something new is revealed. A new detail that

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/15/945418550/mc-and-actor-riz-ahmed-embraces-a-new-kind-of-role-in-sound-of-metal>.

had previously gone unnoticed. A new connection that had somehow escaped us. A new and different way of seeing, or believing, or sensing. Easter is that day when everything changed, and when all that was hidden is suddenly bathed in light and life. We just have to be patient, and wait for it in the knowledge that nothing compares with grand reunion. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.