

MORE THAN A MIRACLE

PART II

A SERMON PREACHED ON EASTER SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 2005

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Gospel Text, Common Lectionary, Year A:

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. 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20:1-18

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People say it was a miracle: Easter. The empty tomb. People say Easter was a miracle, but in doing so they sell Easter short. Our lives, this morning, this moment – these are the miraculous things; and they require something of us as a result of the miracles we see and believe all around us, whether you like it or not.

As I have asserted in these last few weeks' messages our biggest problem with miracles isn't believing in them, but our sometime-reticence to respond to the changes miracles require of us. Miracles of change are a good thing, however, for they give us new eyes to see Easter for what it is, and the risen Lord of our life for who he is: something even more than miracle

Well, I recently heard forty-something writer, Amy Rosenthal has a new book entitled *An Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*. I figure well into midlife anyone's lived long enough to at least publish volume #1. Amy's work enumerates in alphabetical order and a rambling style many of the miscellaneous details of life in bite-size chunks from A to Z.

For instance, "B" could be for "beep," the sound her answering machine makes before you hear her outgoing message, which goes something like this:

"This is Amy. Please leave a message with your name, number, and the time you called; the nature of your call; a good time to get back to you; whether or not you screen; one argument for and one argument against call waiting; your PIN number, SAT scores, and sexual orientation; the name of a good contractor if you've got one; whether you've ever taken anyone's cab and then later felt remorse; a recipe for a nice brisket; if you wouldn't mind looking at a few pictures of my kids; in fact, if you wouldn't mind – and I

know this may be pushing it – taking my kids overnight so I could get one good night’s sleep; what memory makes you cringe with embarrassment; why the word underwear feels sophisticated compared to the silly-sounding underpants; how many monks you know on a first-name basis; whether you’ve ever gotten the giggles at a funeral. ... And I’ll call you back.”

There are so many details and distractions in life, she seems to suggest, it could keep us from seeing the miraculous in the midst of it all; as well as the greater importance of keeping eyes fixed on the big issues, the life and death issues. Her commentary:

“Dying: There are so many ways to die at any given moment. Just look, look at all those ambulances in your rearview mirror. There are crashes and wrecks and collisions galore: A terminal illness you didn’t even know you had could, minutes from now, lives up to its defining adjective.... And then I read this: A young couple killed in a car accident on the way to her father’s funeral. Have you ever? And I’m not even touching on the human-calculated varieties: shooting, stabbing, strangulation by (a) someone you know, (b) someone you don’t know, (c) someone disgruntled (postal worker, unappreciated employee, failing student). And we can’t forget malpractice. People are just dying everywhere, all the time, every which way. What can the rest of us do but hold on for dear life.”

In recent days we have been a nation caught in the grips of a deathwatch over one poor soul, Terry Schiavo, a forty-something person who’s been in a persistent vegetative state for the last fifteen years. Her story – and her family’s bitter conflict and sorrowful estrangement – have confronted everyone caught up in this drama being played out on national news to ask ourselves just exactly *how* the rest of us should “hold on for dear life.”

Last evening on the church patio – as the sun was setting and we lit the Paschal candle and the first light of Easter – we entered the darkened sanctuary like an empty tomb to discover and faithfully remember and remind ourselves that death itself was vanquished. Three time zones earlier a newspaper photo had been taken at sunset in Pinellas Park, Florida. It depicted the silhouette of a protester outside a hospice with a huge crucifix hoisted overhead against the darkening sky. A part of me wanted to whisper the words of hope and faith, if only they could hear me: “It’s Easter, don’t you know? Alleluia, the Lord is risen...”

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For years the medical community had concurred it would have taken a miracle to reverse Terry Schiavo’s irreversible condition. Now, with her family’s legal options exhausted in an effort to have the courts intervene in the husband’s decision to remove his wife’s lifeline, it would take another miracle to save the brain-dead woman’s body from dying, as well.

So the debate rages on over questions which are far more complex than the simple smokescreen arguments over a person’s “final wishes.” These are questions over the “right to life,” or the *sanctity* of life, or *quality* of life; in essence, what constitutes life in all its depth and fullness.

Last Sunday, as we were observing Palm Sunday and the story of our Lord’s death and passion, Congress convened with just a few senators on hand for an emergency session on a rainy day in Washington, D.C. They hastily drafted and passed some legislation, which was quickly signed by the President.

In a statement issued just after 1 AM, George Bush said, “In cases like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts, our society, our laws, and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life. This presumption is especially critical for those like Terri Schiavo, who live at the mercy of others.”

So, in extraordinary situations it is best to err on the side of life. What of the rest of us, who only lead *ordinary* lives? Lives that are so ordinary they could fill an encyclopedia? It would seem the Commander-in-Chief should know

better than anyone else on the face of this earth that *all* of us – the ordinary *and* the extraordinary – live “at the mercy of others.”

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But the irony – if not hypocrisy – is hardly an exclusive claim of national political or military leaders. As we all know, in that same state in the Union where the governor and divided citizenry keep their death watch in protest, there’ll be little dispute over executing the next convicted killer. Now, while the spiritual advisor of Schiavo’s parents stands before the cameras and likens the woman’s dying process to the Holocaust exterminations of Nazi Germany, this scene over which we seem consumed and fixated takes on a ludicrous, almost carnival-like atmosphere.

While some try to imagine what kind of miracle it would now take to get a patient’s feeding tube reinserted in order to sustain a body that cannot survive without such assistance – and until such time as something else will naturally end this mortal life – you and I instead look to something we consider to be more than a miracle this morning, and call it Easter.

In the last few weeks I have spoken about miracles with some of the stories from our scriptures. There was the one about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones that were reconstituted and literally “inspired” with the breath of life. There was the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, and returning him once again to the land of the living and the dying. Each miracle had required something as a result. The people of Israel saw in their own restoration a new relationship with Yahweh that required them to change. And old Lazarus and his friends and neighbors probably never looked at life quite the same after he stumbled out of the tomb that day.

Then, last week we re-enacted the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. It ends with another dead man laid in a tomb. This time it’s Jesus himself, and he’s fresh out of miracles; as if it’d take more than a miracle to deliver us all into a different way of looking at *life* and *death beyond* the grave. The Easter story in all its variations as we have received them in the tradition of our canonical scriptures all tell us this much: In the ordinary lives of very ordinary people something extraordinary happened. But it wasn’t simply miraculous, let alone just damn luck. What was it?

In the resurrection story we read this year from the Gospel of John we have the following fragments handed down to us from his early faith community: Mary discovers the stone removed from the entrance to the tomb, but then retreats to tell Peter and the mysterious “un-named,” but most-beloved disciple (!); who then have a footrace to the final resting place of the one from whom they had fled in fear only two days before.

Peter loses the race and comes in second, but is the first one with the guts or the glory to dare to enter the world of the dead. The linen funeral shroud is found in one place, the cloth used for Jesus’ head neatly rolled up elsewhere; as if someone’s already made up the bed and left!

John continues with the description of the events, along with his reflective interpretation: “Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

Then the disciples return to their homes (huh?), while Mary remains weeping outside the tomb, then peeks inside. Now there are two ghostly apparitions, who ask her why she weeps. “They” took my Lord away, and I don’t know where ...,” she says. “Tell me, and I will take him away...”

She turns around and mistakes the one standing before her as the caretaker of the boneyard. The unrecognizable Lord of her life simply says, “Mary.” “Rabbouni!” she replies in recognition. Then she turns and either flees or rushes to tell the others, “ I have seen the Lord.”

This is what I understand and take away from this Easter story:

1. There is an empty tomb. It is the absence of what once was, but is no more.
2. There is the presence of the risen Lord who has not been taken far away and laid elsewhere, but rather is nearby, and not that far from other where you find yourself looking for him.
3. We may look around for him, but fail to recognize him until he first calls us by name. He does.
4. And, when Mary runs to tell us, "I have seen the Lord," it is, in part, this Easter message: I have seen that which neither you, nor I, could see before. It is the presence of something as yet not fully known, nor recognized, nor fully understood. We may wish to flee the intensity of the experience as much as share the joyous, unbelievable good news.

For one thing, this means that fear, doubt and skepticism were a part of the Easter story from the outset. It also means there was more than just a miracle that requires us to change our way of thinking. There was something more, something as close and real as your next breath; as well as something as elusive and untamable as eternity and the fuller presence of the Lord when he calls us each by name.

In between the extraordinariness of Easter and the ordinariness of our lives we find what we call our resurrected life in Christ. It's not something that's out of this world, but here and now in this Easter moment. The Easter moment, that is Christ's resurrection, is found in the Easter event that is *this* moment. If you are looking for the living presence and promise of eternal life, *this* is it! Here. Now. Easter means this miraculous life of yours is something even *more* than miracle. It is your Easter *gift*.

As an example, I'll tell you about my Easter gift this year -- in the very much *here and now* -- and which came two days early.

A couple years ago a disgruntled parishioner was sufficiently displeased with me that she left the parish, but not before enumerating her complaints in a letter to the Rector and Vestry. I had failed to be the kind of priest and pastor she believed was appropriate. There were harsh words in her message, and -- though sincere - were difficult to hear.

Sherrie and her spouse subsequently moved out of the area, and the dust settled. But in the wake of this little public and personal tempest, it would have been fair to say it would've taken a miracle for us to have ever exchanged another cordial word.

I'd recalled that it was a Good Friday liturgy a number of years ago when Mike and Sherrie had first discovered Saint John's; how they'd been moved by our Lenten custom of unburdening ourselves of the sticks and stones, the failures and shortcomings in our lives. [Any priest honest enough will tell you clergy accumulate a lot of 'em, and oughta be the first in line to lay 'em down.] But unbeknownst to me, for the last two years Mike and Sherrie had continued to follow the life of the parish they'd left through the postings on our website of our weekly newsletter, my sermons, etc.

Two days ago, on this last Good Friday, Sherrie would later tell me she came to the realization that in many ways she had never left this special place, this *Easter* place. At noon they'd jumped in their car and raced -- just as the first disciples did at the news of an empty tomb, but in this case driving hundreds of miles -- arriving for the Good Friday liturgy two minutes after we'd begun.

At the end of the liturgy, as we all recessed out with a tubful of sticks out to the church patio and lit the bonfire to reduce them all to dust and ashes, Sherrie approached me, and we tearfully embraced with a few, simple reconciling words that longed to be heard.

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So now I think of Robert and Mary, Terry Schiavo's parents. I think of Michael, her husband, who has also cared for her the last fifteen years; and I dare not even speculate on how he may, or may not, have failed her in her failing condition. I think about the man arrested and accused of placing a bounty on Michael Schiavo's head. I think of all the folks clamoring behind the police barricades outside the hospice where this woman I don't even know — but know so much about — is dying. I think about the media, the politicians, the courts, the public at large, and I wonder to myself: When this woman dies, who will come to the graveside, lay down their sticks and stones, stand beside each other, and weep with their arms 'round each other? Will Robert and Mary and Michael embrace with the tears they will surely shed?

I tell you, Terry Schiavo's circumstances are regrettable, but they are not tragic. I'll tell you what's tragic. It is the bitter blindness to each other's faults and failings, when we have the choice to do otherwise.

Tragedy does not consist of the sad and painful sorrows that befall us, but instead the ways in which we deliberately fail to seek and choose the ways of wholeness and healing, and a humble, reconciling peace in our relationships with God and each other that are possible. The broken and estranged are the stuff of tragedy, and it's enough to fill a boneyard.

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Many of us have had an experience similar to this: I remember when my own father was in his last dying days there was a natural course to the progression of his disease; and we could have forestalled the inevitable through extreme measures — had we the will and inclination to do so. We didn't. And honestly, in the end, it wasn't a matter of honoring his "final wishes," or legally following any advanced health care directive, or even simply defining death as a part of life — which, of course, it is — rather than the merely the antithesis of merely our mortal life. Beyond all that, we'd shared an Easter faith and a life of faith. Death, we say, was not the end of my father's life.

Anyone with eyes to see can understand the miracle of life. But our Easter faith is a gift that is something more, which we call our resurrected life in Christ. This is it. "I have seen the Lord," we join in saying with all the endless, echoing alleluia's. And it is more than a miracle.

Amen. *jb+*



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