

EASTER IN A WORD

John 20:1-18

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All four gospel writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - tell the Easter story, though there are variations. It's not a surprise that the story is in all four gospels, since this is the central story of our faith. But none of the gospel writers tells us exactly when the resurrection happened. We know when the resurrection was discovered - early in the morning, when the women arrive to prepare Jesus' body for burial. In John's version, it's only Mary. She alone comes to the tomb.

Jesus dies on a Friday, and his body is laid in the tomb. Friday evening through Saturday evening is the Jewish sabbath, and no work can be done on the Sabbath. So at the earliest possible moment on Sunday morning, the women show up at the tomb. John tells us that the stone at the entrance of the tomb had already been moved when Mary arrives.

None of the gospel writers knows when the resurrection occurs. John tells us that Mary stands outside the tomb, weeping, because she believes Jesus' body has been stolen. It's one more indignity, one more act of cruelty. It's not enough that Jesus was beaten, whipped, mocked and crucified - now his enemies are not even allowing him to be properly buried. She peers into the tomb and sees two angels. They say to her, "Why are you weeping?" She says, "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him." She then turns around and sees someone standing in the garden, someone she doesn't recognize. He says to her, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Thinking she's talking to the gardener, she says, "Was it you who moved

the body? Where is it?" The man then speaks her name. "Mary." And when he speaks her name, she knows who he is.

The sheep always know their shepherd's voice.

She says to him, "Rabbi."

That encounter, to me, is resurrection. That's when resurrection happens for me. In that moment, Jesus is alive. The Jesus who sees each person as beloved. The Jesus who calls each person by name. The Jesus who tells us that we are so precious, so known to God, that each hair on our head is counted.

What makes Easter such a joyous day? It's not the account of someone being raised from the dead. It's all about who that someone is. If the story was told that an evil person had come back from the dead, we'd be in the realm of horror and fear. If the story was told that an anonymous person had come back from the dead, the resurrection would be a mere curiosity. The way Jesus lived before his death, before the Easter story, the divinely-loving person he was, has everything to do with why we are celebrating here today.

The Jesus we celebrate on Easter is the Jesus who always sees people, individual persons, the way he sees Mary on Easter morning, looking her in the eye and calling her by name. In an era when children were considered property by most and when any child with a disability was considered disposable by many, Jesus showed love for children. He said, "Let the children come to me." He picked them up, looked them in the eye and blessed them. In the time and place of Jesus, women were not considered worthy of education and had no legal rights over their own lives, but Jesus chose women as his close companions. He befriended them and listened to their stories and their counsel. He showed his love for women by treating them with dignity.

One day Jesus is walking towards Jericho when he hears someone calling for him. There's a large crowd around him, Jesus can't tell where the voice is coming from, but he stops in his tracks. "Bring him to me," Jesus says. The cry is coming from a man who was blind, a man who has no way to support himself except to sit at the side of the road and beg. Jesus reveals his love for the man by asking him, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Sir, I want my sight back." Jesus heals the man, restoring not only his sight but his chance at abundant life. Now he can reenter the world, now he can worship again, now he can seek employment. That's what love does. It makes us whole again.

The same day, Jesus arrives in Jericho, and again, the crowds are thick and loud. He's popular now; everyone wants to see him - those who believe and follow and those who are just curious. Love causes Jesus to look up, into a tree, where a short man named Zacchaeus has climbed up and perched. Love causes Jesus to look Zacchaeus in the eye and call him by name. He invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house even though Zacchaeus is a tax collector, someone actively involved in cheating, making money at the expense of those who are poor and oppressed. Because he has been loved, Zacchaeus is moved to say to Jesus, "I am giving my money to charity." That's what love does. It transforms us into people who change the world for the better.

What rises on Easter Sunday morning is love. It is love that is stronger than death. Love will win out over evil. It is love that conquers despair. Love has the power to break through all of the tombs in which we have been placed, and the tombs we sometimes choose for ourselves. Love can break us out of the tombs of selfishness, greed, and apathy. It starts when we pattern our lives around the one who looked people in the eye, and called them by name.

A doctor in Baltimore began a tradition. Whenever he was scheduled to work on a Sunday morning, he would stop by Dunkin Donuts on his way to the hospital and pick up a bag of bagels for the staff in his unit. Not that they needed them, but it helped create some camaraderie among their team. This particular Dunkin Donuts is right across the street from a homeless shelter, so there are frequently people in the Dunkin Donuts who are homeless. Last year in February, the doctor was in line to buy bagels and he noticed the couple in front of him. He assessed them and concluded two things about them: one, they were dirty, and two, they were deeply in love. He overheard their conversation and learned one more fact about them. They were counting their coins to see if they had enough to buy one of the heart-shaped donuts Dunkin Donuts releases every year around Valentines Day. They were a nickel short. The woman turned around, looked at the doctor and said, "Hey, could you give me a nickel?" The doctor was already feeling guilty about buying bagels for people who really didn't need them. He looked the woman in the eye and said, "Go ahead and order breakfast; I'll pay for it with my order."

In a moment, it's the couple's turn at the front of the line. They order a full breakfast. The cashier assesses the couple too, knows they're from the homeless shelter, and thinks she's going to be stiffed. She says to them, "You can't order all that food; you can't pay for it." The man says, "No, no, the guy behind us is buying us breakfast." The doctor interjects, "Yes, I'm buying them breakfast - let them get whatever they want." In line behind the doctor is a nurse, picking up a coffee before her shift begins. She is overseeing and overhearing this whole transaction and says, "That's a really cool idea." She sees another person in line who looks homeless and says, "Can I buy you breakfast?" A police officer in the other line observes it all and says to someone, "Hey can I buy you breakfast?" The Sunday School teacher picking up donut holes turns

to the person behind her and says, "Can I buy you breakfast?" Within 30 seconds the love cascade went seven people deep.

As the doctor is walking out with his bag of bagels, the couple says to him, "Would you speak with us a moment?" "Sure." He sat down with the couple as they were enjoying their breakfast and the woman said to him, "We want you to know that we're not nobodies. We've just made some bad decisions in our lives." The doctor said, "Haven't we all?" The man then said, "But we're going to get our act together." As he was getting up to leave the doctor said, "And I so believe you will, that do me a favor. When you do, go buy someone else breakfast."

Fast forward to June. The doctor is back at Dunkin Donuts to pick up bagels for the hospital staff and the cashier says, "Hey doc, some guy left this note for you." On a wrinkled piece of paper, written in pencil, was this note, "I bought somebody breakfast."

That's what love does. It sees people not as categories or labels or statistics but as human beings with potential and worth.

How would the world be different if we embodied the love of Jesus? What would change if we looked people in the eye and saw each person as someone with a story of value? What if we stopped seeing one another as Democrats and Republicans, automatically making judgments about each other? What if we stopped seeing people as "others"? How can we love people if we lump them into categories? Not all immigrants are alike, not all refugees have the same story, not all police officers have the same politics, not all transgender people have the same feelings, not all veterans think the same way about war and peace. Love calls us to get to know people, taking the time to listen to each story, call people by name, look them in the eye. What would happen if we helped restore each person's sense of value, worth and dignity? It's what Jesus did.

Peter Pronovost is a new resident of Cleveland. He moved here in October to work for the University Hospitals system...how's this for a job title? He is the Chief Clinical Transformation Officer, which means that he is responsible for improving value across the health system, helping people stay well, get well and manage their most acute medical conditions. He is a creative thinker who has won the MacArthur Foundation's Genius Award. When he spoke recently at the City Club of Cleveland he said this, "Stories are the most potent force for change in the world - they drive how we behave. Whether we see ourselves as powerful or powerless, whether we see each other as competitors or as collaborators - change the story and you change everything."

Pronovost is concerned about the culture in America's hospitals and in America's health care system. He wants to improve our success rate in treating diseases, preventing infections and accidents. He believes that hospitals start changing their culture by changing their narrative. Health care systems should tell themselves the story that achieving zero patient deaths is actually possible. He raised some eyebrows at first with all this talk about story but he said, "Words matter. Changing our stories changes how we behave." People listen to him because he is personally responsible for cutting the rate of catheter infections in the United States by 85%.

He sought to learn from other organizations that he considered efficient. So he made arrangements to visit one of the U.S. military's massive aircraft carriers. He was incredibly impressed with the high reliability of this operation. On a ship the size of a football field, with waves as high as 60 feet, a plane can land with complete accuracy every three seconds. On board, after he met with an admiral on the ship, he ran into a man who was in charge of sweeping the deck. "I asked that gentleman what job he does," Pronovost said. "He stood up tall and proud, looked me in the eye and said, 'Sir, I

help the planes take off and land safely to serve the mission of the United States.’ I said, ‘Whoa, that’s a guy connected to his purpose.’”

Pronovost asked the same question of an environmental services worker at a hospital. “What do you do here at the hospital?”, he asked. The man looked down sheepishly. “I clean the rooms,’ he muttered. Pronovost looked the man in the eye and said, “You know what you are? You are an infection prevention specialist. If this room isn’t clean, C.Diff happens, MRSA happens. You are helping people stay alive and well.”

Peter Pronovost walks around the hospital talking about love. It’s not a word you often hear on hospital rounds or in hospital boardrooms. But he believes it’s the key to everything. Love is looking people in the eye, calling them by name, listening to their story, and treating them with dignity and respect.

Love is what rises from the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Three places in the Hebrew scriptures, you can find this statement, “We are God’s people, we are the apple of God’s eye.” When Jesus is baptized, the heavens open and God says these words to Jesus and to each of us, “You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased.” There is nothing we can’t do when we remember how much we are loved by the God who created us. That God gives us Jesus to be our example. Look at him. Watch him and know how you are to walk on this earth. Look at how he treats people. And see what a difference that makes.

In her weeping and in her despair, Mary hears Jesus call her by name. That’s love. That’s resurrection. That’s the good news that has the power to transform you and me and this world God loves.