

Alleluia, Alleluia!

After 40 days of our Lenten journey together, tonight we hear the Gospel that *doesn't quite take us to the end of the story*.

We have an angel moving the massive tombstone, an earthquake, we have guards (no doubt Roman guards) who shook with fear and fell to the ground, and an **empty tomb**, but we don't reach the satisfying conclusion we've been longing for -- that Christians of every age anticipate – a radiant Jesus telling us not to be afraid.

At a time when we're grasping for every possible ray of hope – longer days, more people vaccinated, and a new day for compassion and justice-seeking in the executive branch of our federal government, we long for the next chapter of this story.

Welcome to the human-ness of the human experience.

Here's what Jesus signed up for in the human experience:

- Hope and faith in the face of trouble and ambiguity,
- the unpredictability and sorrow of life,
- AND the massive joys and wonders of being alive,
- loving and being loved,
- knowing deep in our bones the beauty and sacredness of all creation,
- glimpsing and believing in our own goodness.

The human experience.

Jesus spent 33 years immersed in our experience, both fully human and fully divine, a concept my mind still struggles to grasp, and at the end of his life he experienced the suffering that breaks so many of our hearts at one time or another. To be human was to **be in it, really in it, in it all.**

And, for the witnesses to his rising, he has Roman guards and the faithful women who traveled with him. Women who, in a patriarchal society, were considered lowly and unimportant, without authority or

power or education, probably only noticed if they stepped outside their strict gender roles of the time. This lowly status in society probably made it easier for them to visit the tomb early that morning.

In his life, at the time of his death and even in his rising, Jesus was present to the poor and the overlooked. The gospels are full of the interesting characters who Jesus spent his time with – those who society would see as questionable or lacking in power or honor, Jesus drew them to himself with a fierce love that embraces us too – humans with flaws and weaknesses, hearts and souls. **Us.**

In the summer of 2004 Jane and I were fortunate to spend a week in the northern Italian city, Bologna, full of Renaissance treasures of art and architecture and very few American tourists. Every day that we were there we visited an artwork I'll never get out of my mind – it is titled the Lamentation Over the Dead Christ – and it is in the Santa Maria della Vita cathedral by the artist Niccolo dell'Arca. It is unlike anything I have ever seen, in decades of looking at art.

It is a grouping of almost life-size sculptures of 7 individuals— no frame, no back wall supporting them, standing like actors on a stage. They are not carved of marble like almost everything else you've seen from the Renaissance, they are terracotta – the warm, reddish-brown clay that is fired into hardness. It is a common material, not a luxurious one. It is hard to comprehend how this work, made of such a fragile material, has survived for nearly 600 years.

In this group, Christ has been taken down from the cross before he is placed in the tomb, and this group of individuals, 2 men, 4 women are reacting dramatically and realistically to the pain and sorrow they feel – their arms are thrown wide, their fingers stretched apart grasping at air, they wear wrenched expressions of pain, shock, grief. The most emphatic of these is Mary of Magdala with the intensity of her gesture making her look as if she will take flight. The body of Jesus lies before them.

You can practically hear the tears and the breath of these people who are mourning the destruction, the injustice, the tragedy. While it is painful to look on their sorrow, it is astounding to see this work's honesty in an artistic period that idealized certain kinds of stylized beauty and emotional distance. ***The artist decided to tell it like it is.***

Thankfully, we know where this story goes. These followers of Jesus will survive these terrible days and live to rejoice in the resurrection, and so will we.

In this moment, in perhaps the worst moment of their lives, the human and divine Christ is with the group of people in their sorrow, as Christ is with us in every travail, fear and sorrow. Christ is with us in the loss of life and isolation suffered during COVID, the agonies of racial violence, oppression, discrimination, mass shootings, poverty, and the desperation of people seeking asylum in a new country. This pain and heartache were present in Jesus's life and they were there at the foot of the cross, too.

AND the message of Easter is that Christ is with us in every human joy and triumph, too. Christ is with us in the glorious dawn when our grief has not ended but has been metabolized enough so that we laugh again. Christ is with us in the transcendent goodness of life, love, hope, work, family, friendship, new beginnings and lasting love, treasured past and bright future. Christ is with us in all of that, too.

Few Renaissance artists chose to follow Niccolo dell'Arca's inspiration to make what is essentially a documentary film in terra cotta sculpture like he did in 1463. Art historians note that despite his prominence as an artist, he was not copied.

In this work, he only showed us the story in the depth of its sorrow. Niccolo dell'Arca needed to show us another work -- the group at the empty tomb and Jesus appearing to Mary of Magdala, unimportant in society but chosen by Christ to see him first.

He needed to show us, and we need to see the empty tomb for ourselves, so we know **to look for Jesus in the Galilee** of our own lives, our homes, our communities, our families, our workplaces. For the angel tells Mary:

Jesus has risen from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee.

You will see Jesus there.

“That is the message I have for you.”

You will see Jesus there.

There’s another work of art that answers the sculpture of Niccolo Dell’Arca. It is closer to home and cannot be found in any museum or church. It is a book club that I read about in the Boston Sunday Globe Magazine.

A group of women in Newton formed a book club many years ago and call themselves the Bodacious Bibliophiles. They started out as a moms group and then moved on to book discussions, bottles of wine and weekends away together.

They became loving community to each other. They have supported each other through divorce and death; they organized a group text chain each time one of their members received chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer. Tote bags full of books and containers of homemade soup appear on each other's doorsteps. They pray for each other, and they quilt and knit for each other, too. They cheer each other on in good times and bad. This book club and everywhere that we find loving community fulfill what our Easter Gospel says tonight: Jesus is risen and now goes ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.

Happy Easter!

May you see Jesus in your Galilee!