



Sermon

Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12

The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

Christ Church Detroit

In his poem called “The Answer”, the twentieth-century Welsh poet & priest R. S. Thomas writes,

*There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love’s risen body.”¹*

In this and others of Thomas’ poems, he searches, seemingly unafraid, through “darkness”², unbelief, and abject uncertainty, naming unflinchingly what he feels and observes. Only briefly and in unexpected, unbidden ways, does he occasionally glimpse and name any brightness of clarity or assurance. He is said to be a “Good Friday poet” more than he is an “Easter poet”.

To see him in today’s Easter story, we might imagine him, in the wake of Jesus’ death, going to the tomb, fully expecting it to be closed, because that’s what tombs are—coming to the tomb to come as close as he can to his friend, to recall and remember his words, to feel, unflinchingly, what comes up.

Darkness and loss: these, in Thomas’ example, are painfully but clearly named. That is, there is some ease in naming and writing about what we *can* see, what we know we have felt and experienced. It is difficult (and we see this in Thomas’ writings) to name what we *cannot* see. Darkness and loss, Good Friday and the tomb, are objective in a sense in that we can see them physically. Joy and celebration come indeed in the morning, at dawn, even in the twilight, but so often, we have no idea how. Suspended in the dawn and twilight, there is often perplexity and disbelief, before joy comes fully in the brightness of the morning.

¹ Accessed at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/1736-the-answer>

² Ibid.

Today, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other Mary (there are so many wonderful Marys) come to the tomb, because that is what they do. They have the spices in their hands, and desire to come as close as they can to their beloved friend, whom they have lost. Even with their hands full of spices and oils, they know that there is nothing they can do to bring him back. Nevertheless, they are compelled to be there, to come close, to feel what they feel, and be together. In that twilight dawn, they are perplexed to see that the stone has been rolled away, and then terrified to see that his body is not there. Their fear spikes: something wrong must have happened—was his body stolen? Grief upon grief.

In Luke's Gospel as well as Matthew's and Mark's, the story of that twilight dawn and the empty tomb is told with some variations, but always about the women, and what they see, and how afraid and perplexed they are, and always with a visit from some unexplainable being or beings, unbidden and unexpected, that deepen the women's fear, yet also point them and guide them to their next steps.

In Mark's Gospel, the women run away terrified and are not recorded as doing or saying anything else; that is where Mark's Gospel ends. I can relate to that. In Matthew's and Luke's, the women are recorded as doing something next; their next steps are written down. In Luke's Gospel, the women run away, terrified, and they run to see their friends, the disciples, the guys. As they run, they are roiling with questions and fear. Nevertheless, they persist, and name what they have seen, and even more, attempt to name what they have *not* seen, what they have felt.

Their running and their telling of the story is the next step—the first action of the resurrection. They don't have many words for it—so often we don't, when incredible and mysterious things happen—but nevertheless, the next step, a next step, is to name what we see and what we feel.

The writer David Brooks wrote a few months ago in an essay in the New York Times about how his life of faith is developing in ways that he had not expected. He writes, "When faith finally tiptoed into my life, it didn't come through information or persuasion but, at least at first, through numinous experiences," mysterious experiences. "These," he writes, "are the scattered moments of awe and wonder that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time...In those moments, you have a sense that you are in the presence of something overwhelming, mysterious. Time is suspended or at least blurs."³ It cannot, I would add, be understood, at least not at first.

He quotes the writer Christian Wiman as saying, "Religion is not made of these moments"—they are, sometimes, few and far between, but—"religion is the means of making these moments part of your life, rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward."⁴

³ "The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be", *New York Times*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/19/opinion/faith-god-christianity.html>

⁴ Quoted in the above

What would have happened if the women, the first witnesses of the mystery of the resurrection, having the numinous experience of numinous experiences, had never said anything about it? What is resurrection if not witnessed, named, celebrated, and cherished? In our creed, we say that we “look for the resurrection”; that is what we do.

In the women’s case, their words fell as “idle”⁵ upon the men listening to them—but not all of the men. Though their words fell idle on ten of the eleven, there was one who took them seriously, whose interest was piqued, whose curiosity guided him to go and see for himself. It was Peter, the one whose disbelief of how Jesus was suffering just days before over made him deny their friendship not once, not twice, but three times. How unlikely it is that of all of the guys, it was Peter, the one who had denied his beloved friend multiple times, who went to the tomb himself to take a look.

What he finds there—the linen clothes by themselves, laying “piled”, the “graveclothes” of his friend’s risen body⁶—changes his life entirely. He will go on to name what he has seen and to act upon that truth that goes beyond words or understanding. He will dedicate his life to what another poet names as “a place of constant beginning that has within it what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart. To that place” Peter will “commit” himself.⁷ Upon that “rock” the Church will grow in such unlikely and unexpected ways.⁸

Questions will captivate those early disciples as much as they captivate and capture us now. Perhaps like R. S. Thomas, like Peter, and like the women at the tomb, we might not fear our questions or let our uncertainty keep us quiet, but will go to the tomb, feel what we feel, name what we see and even what we don’t, and dedicate ourselves to that “place of constant beginning that has within it what no eye has seen” or “hand has touched”⁹, that we might someday experience a “stone rolled” from our minds, “believing and discerning”¹⁰ in awe and clarity, our questions and fears lying “folded and in a place by themselves”, “graveclothes of our love’s, our Lord’s, “risen body”.¹¹

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

⁵ Luke 24:11

⁶ Thomas, Ibid.

⁷ From “7” of *The Seven Last Words* by Mark Strand,

<https://journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/1735-the-last-seven-words>. Portions “1” and “4” from this work had been read at our Good Friday evening service on April 18, 2025.

⁸ In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [Greek *petros*, ‘Peter’] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

⁹ Strand, Ibid.

¹⁰ Lauren Jackson, “Americans Haven’t Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion”, New York Times, April 18, 2025: “I live an ocean away from that small Arkansas chapel, but I still remember the bliss of finding the sublime in the mundane. I still want it all to be true: miracles, souls, some sort of cosmic alchemy that makes sense of the chaos. For years, I haven’t been able to say that publicly. But it feels like something is changing. That maybe culture is shifting. That maybe we’re starting to recognize that it’s possible to be both believing and discerning after all.”

¹¹ Thomas, Ibid.