



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

John 20:1-18

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Easter Sunday

## “Resurrection”

Mary came to the tomb of Jesus “*while it was still dark*”. She came for what American poet, Emily Dickenson, referred to as the “solemnest industry enacted upon earth”, the “sweeping up after death”. Mary came to tend to the body of Jesus, a gruesome task given the manner of his execution and all that he meant to her. We, in the modern Western world, have difficulty imagining this kind of intimacy with mortality. We don’t *do* death well. But according to the story, Mary did not flinch. She not only witnessed Jesus’ execution. The morning after, in the midst of the darkness, she faces into her deep despair and goes to his tomb.

Over the weekend I watched the film, *The Darjeeling Limited*. It’s about three wealthy brothers, who board a train in India, after their father’s death and the strange disappearance of their mother, to try and get a little “spirituality” into their lives. The film opens with the three of them trying desperately to get to their father’s funeral. But they never make it, as they are sidetracked on the way to the funeral when one of the brothers deems it more important to pick up his father’s Porsche from the garage where it was being repaired. They are a neurotic threesome and this is related, one suspects, to their inability to follow Mary’s example and go into the

darkness to face their deepest fears. Their spiritual search is pathetic because it is more a flight from reality than it is a journey into the heart of reality.

Things shift, however, when they attempt to rescue three young Indian boys after the boy’s raft tips over in a torrential river. They manage to save two of the boys, but one dies. The three Western brothers are invited to attend the funeral. There they witness the Eastern rituals of death: the father washing his son’s delicate body, and anointing it with a mud mixture; the building of a pyre upon which the boy’s body is burned and witnessed by the whole community; and then the ceremonial river cleansing of each person in the village after the funeral – the sweeping up after death. The brothers vicariously deal with their father’s death through this funeral. They finally risk entering the darkness that Mary faced when she went that first Easter morning to face her worst fears. And then, but not until then, they begin to experience new life.

Darkness is underrated in most religious systems – especially perhaps in Christianity. We prefer light. We associate God almost exclusively with the image of light, and rarely with darkness. And yet, when you stop to think about it, even in the Bible,

transformation just as often occurs in and through darkness: Noah spends forty days and forty nights in an epic storm, as a prelude to a new creation; Jacob wrestles through the night with an angel in order to receive the blessing of reconciliation with his brother Esau; Elijah escapes to a cave and there in the darkness hears the still, small voice of God; Jonah spends three days in the belly of a whale according to that legend; in the darkness that is sleep God speaks to a host of Biblical characters through the medium of dreams, and Paul is blinded as a prelude to his new life.

Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark, and if this Easter story is going to transcend the Hallmark, bunny rabbit and Easter egg hunt meaning, then we are asked to follow Mary, through our own dark night of the soul, to the tomb where Jesus was laid.

The truth is that we bring with us a deep sense of betrayal that is a part of what it means to be human. Things do not go our way. People we love die. We get sick for reasons we cannot comprehend and we did not deserve. Terrible violence is enacted upon innocent victims. The homeless and the hungry subsist in a world in which some executives are paid 60 million dollars in a severance package! The planet that gives us life is struggling to survive and we have a growing awareness that we are the ones behind the global crucifixion of the innocent earth. All of this we bring with us to the tomb. Let's be honest.

We arrive this morning, in the midst of a deep darkness.

I received an email from a friend. Embedded in the email was a letter from Joanna Macy, author, deep ecologist and Buddhist scholar. I was moved by her words. Here is a paragraph of her letter.

How do we confront what we scarcely dare to think?

How do we face our grief, fear, and rage without "going to pieces?"

It is good to realize that falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed, it is as essential to transformation as the cracking of outgrown shells. Anxieties and doubts can be healthy and creative, not only for the person, but for the society,

because they permit new and original approaches to reality. What disintegrates in periods of rapid transformation is not the self, but its defenses and assumptions.

Self-protection restricts vision and movement like a suit of armor, making it harder to adapt.

Going to pieces, however uncomfortable, can open us up to new perceptions, new data, and new responses.

When we risk the dark and choose not avoid it, we discover with Mary some "new data". Somebody has rolled away the stone from tomb. We came to make peace with despair, to allow ourselves to "go to pieces" but find ourselves unexpectedly surprised by hope. At first, Mary assumes that somebody has stolen the body. And

when John and Peter arrive at the tomb, what they “believe” at first is not that Jesus has risen from the dead, but that the Romans are playing with their emotions – not even allowing them to grieve properly. But hints that something else is going on are all around – strange men, grave cloths lying around that should have accompanied the corpse, and then somebody whom Mary takes to be a gardener plants a seed of transformation in the soil of her heart, claiming to be Jesus himself.

These intimations of hope are everywhere, once we get ourselves to the tomb, and it is an important spiritual discipline to notice them and pay attention. They come upon us like the first snowdrop peaking through the snow, that never fails to surprise because we had made peace with the season of winter. Hope is the last thing to die in the human heart. It is as though we come into the world with hope as a standard feature – it just comes with the package.

There are many ways to take this Easter story. Traditionalists will take it literally, claiming that believing in a physical resurrection is the key to salvation; modernists, steeped in the scientific paradigm, will want a little more proof before they believe; postmodernists will read it metaphorically, claiming that it is one sacred story among others, pointing not to the “Truth” (capital T) of Christianity, but to *a* truth about the nature of reality. Late postmodernists would deconstruct the Easter story as a metanarrative used by the dominant

class to blind the masses and perpetuate the status quo. But the really interesting thing is that representatives from all these worldviews may very well show up on an Easter morning, because this thing called hope stirs within the hearts of skeptics and believers alike – and across the board, we all seek out stories that will help hope to flower.

If there is a common thread running through the various interpretations of this story it is that there is a Higher Power at work in the universe, rendering our darkest moments – metaphorically speaking the tombs of our lives – crucibles of transformation. A great work of new life – which the New Testament calls resurrection – goes on even when we are feeling that this darkness is no more than the suffocating tomb of despair.

Biologist, Elisabet Sahtouris, uses the metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly to illustrate. She believes that the earth community is undergoing a great transformation. It feels as though the old systems and the old ways of thinking and doing things are becoming more and entrenched, both within ourselves and in our institutions. These old systems of thinking and doing can be compared to a caterpillar that munches its way through vast amounts of food. One caterpillar can decimate the leaves of an entire tree. Think of our egos in this way – this part of us has an insatiable appetite for more, and with that comes great destructive capacities. We are munching our way through the planet,

through relationships, through everything in search of security.

At a certain point, the caterpillar bloats itself until it just can't function anymore, and then it forms a chrysalis. New cells begin to appear in the body of the caterpillar, which scientists call *imaginal* cells. In the darkness of the caterpillar's cocoon, the imaginal cells begin to proliferate. The immune system of the caterpillar starts to attack these new cells because it doesn't recognize them. Eventually, the immune cells can't keep up and everything inside the cocoon dissolves into a nutritive soup that begins to feed the new creature growing within the cocoon. Eventually, this will become the butterfly.

Think about the tomb in which Jesus was laid as the chrysalis – the tomb of death as *womb* of life. Those who put him there acted like the immune system, trying to rid the world of the new creation that is trying to be born. But what if those of us gathered here this morning are like his mystical body. With people of other faiths, and those of no particular faith system, but who are working for a new earth community, we are the imaginal cells. While it is still dark, it may feel like death, but in truth we are proliferating inexorably, linking up with other imaginal cells across the planet. These comprise the new, resurrected body of Christ. The old systems, and the old ways of thinking, that lead to despair on a personal level, and injustice and ecological devastation at a collective level, will inevitably act like an immune system, trying to rid itself of this

foreign entity. But there is no need to attack this old system. It is in the process of disintegrating. The old structures will eventually become a nutritive soup out of which a new earth and a new way of being will emerge. There is a power at work within us and within the universe itself, a natural grace, fashioning wings in the darkness.

Mary impulsively wants to reach out and hang on to Jesus. But he forbids it. He tells her that his newly formed wings are very delicate. Her clinging is part of an old system, an old way of believing. He has not yet “ascended to the Father” and he will need his wings in tact for that journey. Metaphorically, I think this is a way of saying that Easter is not exclusively about Jesus. God is always doing a new thing in every age and in every person. You and I are being raised in Christ this very morning. We are centers of sacred imagination, the imaginal cells of Christ's new body. Our role is not to hang on to “belief in Jesus”, but to spread our wings and fly with Christ toward the heart of the Holy One, and as we do we give shape to the new heaven and the new earth that is emerging.

Christ is risen, friends! Hallelujah!