

Days of Miracle and Wonder

We begin this Easter morning with a footrace. Peter and the one called the Beloved Disciple, hearing early in the morning from Mary Magdalene that the stone covering Jesus' tomb had been moved, take off running. They don't talk about it, they don't ask her for details; say simply head out the door and sprint for the tomb.

As he ran, struggling to keep up with the other disciple (who must have been faster since he ended up getting there first), I wonder what must have been going through Peter's mind. The grief and trauma of the last few days had to have been weighing heavily in him. After all, he had watched his friend and teacher suffer and die. He had seen crowds turn on Jesus, and even on him. Peter had come so far in coming to know what Jesus taught about God's love for him and for all those who hungered for a deeper knowledge of God, only to see it come to an end when Jesus was on the cross. Peter must have felt crushed, deflated, and broken.

But remember too that this was just days – hour, really – since Peter's last moments alone with Jesus and the other disciples. That was when they shared a meal in the upper room, stepping away from the pressure and confusion of Jerusalem to be reminded of Jesus' love for his friends. Jesus loved his disciples, and loved them to the end. He showed this by spending this precious time with them, by washing their feet, by breaking bread with them, by sharing the cup with them. These last moments were ones of intimacy, hospitality and grace. These memories, too, must have been fresh in Peter's mind as he ran: the touch of warm water on his feet, the taste of bread and wine.

Peter must also have been remembering Jesus' words that his death would not be the end of the story. Such things, of course, are hard to believe.

Until now. Suddenly, as Peter ran, all these memories and feelings began to come together. Suddenly, all the things that he had once thought impossible were beginning to seem like they could actually be real. Peter wasn't just running to the tomb: he was sprinting across the threshold of belief, as he came to know, in his mind, body and soul, that Jesus had been resurrected.

But let's not mistaking *knowing* for *thinking*. Peter was never accused of stopping and thinking too much, and this story is no exception. Peter doesn't win the footrace; the other disciple gets there first, but for some reason stops at the threshold. Peter doesn't think, and he doesn't stop. His love for Jesus has too much momentum for him to hit the breaks. He runs right past the other disciple, into the tomb where he sees the linen and the cloth, and he simply believes. Peter sees, and he believes.

I have been thinking lately of a simple phrase from a song by Paul Simon: the phrase is "I believe these are the days of miracle and wonder." The song itself is not about Easter, but that line stands out as containing the heart of the Easter story. Jesus' resurrection calls us to be awake to miracle and wonder all around us, to God's continuing work in the world, to stories and experiences of rebirth that are a profound part of each of our lives.

This is a way of seeing that is the very essence of belief, yet it can be very hard to see the world this way sometimes. There is much in this world that can make belief seem hollow. Quaint. Meaningless in a world that can be uncertain, frightening, and inhumane. Irrelevant in the face of the sadness and grief that we all live through at times.

But belief is not hollow, and it is certainly not quaint. On the contrary, it is grounded in the knowledge that God created us for something more: God created us to be vessels of joy and wonder, in a world that so desperately needs it. God calls us to be instruments of peace and healing so that all people might experience the fullness of life in God. God walks with us in the depths of our sadness, never letting us go so that we, too might be awake to moments of new life when we are ready to see them.

Our lives are given their ultimate meaning by the empty tomb. By running to it as Peter did we return the love that Jesus gives to us. We embody and bear witness to the love that changes lives, and can transform the world. God calls us not only to see and believe, but to be resurrected from lives of fear and shame and self-centeredness, so that we may be free to see the things of miracle and wonder that are all around us. More than that, God wants us to become so good at seeing those things that we cannot help but share them with others.

In short, God makes us free to love, with all our heart, mind, and spirit.

Peter, after a long journey with Jesus, finally was able to see these things. He was finally able to figure out that Jesus was opening up his heart – a heart that, like all hearts, had been broken a time or two – so that he could experience the unconditional, healing and life-giving love of the one who created him. Peter was finally able to “get it.” Not because he understood it, of course: the gospel passage is quite clear that he doesn’t understand much of anything that morning. It was, I believe, that Peter had finally come to embody the love that Jesus had taught him. Love had become his story and his witness. He had seen the Lord, and that was enough.

It’s a good thing for Peter that it was love that truly mattered, because if critical thought and theological acuity were what were required, he might have been in some trouble. Peter was not one to let “thinking” get in the way of “doing” or “speaking.” We might say that Peter lacked a certain “filter.” Peter was always getting into trouble for saying the wrong thing, and for acting rashly. But now that same tendency that earned him the occasional rebuke became a great gift once he “got it.” He had begun to embody Jesus’ love, and acted out of that place. He had become the best kind of witness, the kind who lived and moved and had his being in God. Throughout the gospel, Peter had been taking clumsy baby steps. This morning, he was sprinting.

Peter did not understand what he saw in the empty tomb. He didn’t have to. The capacity to see miracle and wonder is not predicated on the ability to understand it. In fact, if we understood it, it wouldn’t be miraculous, and it would hardly be full of wonder.

Being awake to miracle and wonder is not just about seeing “good and nice things,” and is certainly not about going through life with blinders to hardship. On the contrary, it means being aware of the reality of pain, but knowing that God is present in the midst of it, bringing about new life in places where we only knew loss. Peter had no blinders on when he was running to the tomb. His heart ached, and his pain was real.

But Peter would soon see that God’s love cannot be contained. To let this knowledge become the ground of our being is to set our sights, ultimately, on the joy to which God calls us, a joy that both transcends the present time and can be found within it. This is the deeper story of our lives.

This is what love is all about. This is what the resurrection is all about, and we are the people of resurrection. We are called to be vessels of joy, and bearers of miracle and wonder, so that all can see us, and see Jesus, and believe.

Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed!

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens

Easter Sunday

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

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