

Easter Twist

April 12, 2020 | Corona Times Sharing

John 20:1-18

The Pooh Corner Portal

Our backyard is kind of a portal. I'm starting to think of it as the Hundred Acre Wood of Winnie the Pooh fame. Complete with animal friends and mishaps. We emerge from the realities of our home and find that we suddenly have paths and greenery on the Fairway Hills golf course. We don't go too far, and we distance from folks along the way. But you can see the freedom in their faces and in their little legs on the bike. When the golf course is open, we can't travel the fairways with the golfers.

Every day we visit this one little spot of grass—our mandala. A design that has a center and blossoms out in different patterns. We gather little pieces of fallen petals and sticks and dandelions, and even sand. It has become a sacred altar of sorts. We go out to see what has come with the wind or rain. It is our space to tend.

We've started singing ring-around the rosy. We have prayer, dedicating each round to people we know. Yesterday, we sang out for Florence in the hospital. And for Rick, as he waited by the phone to hear more. And our last round last time was for all of you, our KC family.

This precious in between space where we hold what is happening out there. Perhaps you hold this in your heart, or you have a special room in your home or spot on your walk where you return to bear witness to the light and hope you wish to cling to.

Why Are You Weeping?

In the Gospel of John, here is a mysterious place, a gateway into something new. Here we find Mary Magdalene coming to apply the oils and spices of burial a fresh tomb next to a garden. The worst thing has already happened. Trial, torture, and a gruesome death. And if that were not enough, she comes to find that the body has been taken away. Even in death, there will be no proper burial for her beloved teacher.

She makes the mad dash to share the news and comes back to the same spot, determined to find the body. The men go home (in fear and trembling), but Mary stays to weep in the garden, a place removed. Frightfully, there are angels in the tomb.

It's a tender approach that Jesus offers Mary as he comes up from behind: **"Why are you weeping?"** an echo of the angels' question from the tomb. "Why are you weeping acknowledges her pain.

Proper Burial

I don't know about you, but this tender approach suits me just fine. I much prefer that acknowledgement of the weeping in this season to a "Here I am!" jack-in-the-box Jesus.

It's as if we can hear Jesus saying today, "Why are you weeping?" In this season, we would be too startled when things feel on edge and so much already feels tender and tough. The gateway between life and death.

In the face of corona, we question whether appropriate measures are being taken to safeguard and prevent the spread of disease. We sense that many are dying needlessly through neglect, given the lack of availability to track or test or treat this virus in places.

And then when someone dies, we lament when proper burial or memorial services cannot be performed. Military honors have been halted. Some cemeteries are asking people to bring their own shovels. I attended a memorial yesterday via zoom. This is not how we would wish it to be.

And so, can we imagine that Mary's tears are met with the question, "Why are you weeping?" It is Christ's tender entrance into her pain "Why are you weeping?" Not a rebuke. The start of a realization. An empathy outpoured. A gateway unlocked.

Here we see that Easter happens where death has happened. Easter provides our new pathway into a next way of being. The worst things feel like they are happening. We must know that these cannot be the last things.

Collective Grief

We are living into lives that we haven't had to live before.

We face our collective grief about the things that for now are no more: the people we miss, the activities we love, the connections, education, and employment interrupted.

Normalcy is the impossible thing that happened before the tomb. It's impossible because we are differently capable. Death widens us. Our brokenness outstretched. And we will continue in the tender early stages of our weeping.

But we see too, from Mary that there is recognition of God's presence. The one who has been through and shared solidarity and born suffering. Here, now at the supposed tomb of his dying, she commissions her for something more.

Why are we weeping? For so many reasons.

Yet, the worst thing, or the most recent terrible thing, is not the last thing. Mary Magdalene will find the voice to go out from the garden. The words that she speaks to others will no doubt be empathic instead of instructive. She will invite compassion rather than judgment. She will offer into the dying spaces of others' grief, the tears that mourned Jesus even while he stood before her. The weeping that made way for the emergence into this something else that we are becoming.

Quote from Arundhati Roy:

The following quote hit me in the last few days as I have prayed into the questions of what that something could be. When so often I feel a mess inside and it is everything I can do to strap on my shoes and make it to the mandala with my children.

I have been so thankful to hear these words that stretch the grief into the possibilities of our shared future.

On Coronavirus she writes:

...[I]n the midst of terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink our doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.

This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers, and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

We Don't Go Alone

And although we are distanced...*this is not an activity we do alone.* This is not a fight we take up solitarily. Mary goes and spreads the word. We gather in clusters as congregations and virtual communities across this world with the conviction that it is precisely this time when Easter has enlarged us to meet death, the death we know about and that which we didn't realize was already gone. Whether or not we feel like we can squeeze every drop of our time and energies into creativity or activity, our weeping has its importance to acknowledge that normal is not what Easter promises.

It is precisely the vision at the tomb now empty that makes us take stock of a life that will be different. Our empty sanctuaries remind us how church will be different. But we will again congregate in our sacred spaces to weep and wonder into the wild. May they continue on virtually. And then one day, may we reemerge into a more loving, thoughtful, and less polluted world. May they be the sacred space where we gain the strength to journey on in an ongoing and post-pandemic existence.

And as Friedrich Buechner has said, *"Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing."*

Conclusion: When the Kite Is Caught

Last Friday when we ran out to the golf course on a very windy afternoon, my daughter and son couldn't wait to get their kites in the air. It was one of those days when you did not need a whole lot of skill to get a kite afloat a bit. They started to take flight.

I handed over my son's kite to him and he began trotting. I looked over at Phoebe. I looked back over and Jay was now walking on the path too close to the trees: "Jay, the trees! Walk away from the trees!" Come this way into the open space!

He cried out tearfully, "My kite!" Right then, sure enough the kite got caught in the tree right above him. "Seriously?" I was angry. I went over and said: "I told you to come away from the trees! Now, look, your kite is in the tree and I don't think we'll be able to get it out." It was just out of reach.

As I stewed and plotted looking up. His sister came over and, in a surprisingly tender way, said, *"Jay, it must be so hard to have your kite up there. I am so sorry that that happened to you."*

When Phoebe made her response to Jay, she was witnessing to his grief for that which was suddenly lost.

It caught me off guard. I was still not happy, but it made me pause. He didn't mean to do this. This felt like the worst end to a kite, the worst interruption to fun, the least convenient happening. We acquired a stick. And eventually, with some leaping I was able to jump and break off the brittle limb. Then began the long process of unentangling the string. The tail and the string from the stick and then from each other. I couldn't stand the idea that we would just leave the kite like that caught and tangled up.

It took several moments of doubling the string back. And still, the tail and some of the string were bound up together, impossible to release. Eventually, I got the string (mostly) free, although there was no untangling a part of the tail. I noticed that even as he went off jubilant with the kite soaring, there was a still apart of me that wanted to cling to how hard it was to free the kite.

Easter Communion

In our hundred-acre wood, bad things happen. There is no where we go where they will not. Yet, there is this big wide, opening. It is an opening of our hearts as wide as where the stone has been rolled away. And, although the temptation is to keep looking back in and verifying that the worst thing has happened, as we acknowledge the tears—they ease the gateway into the next round of our living.

This kite will not look the same. The body will not be the same. We will not be the same.

Today we come to our mandala, our tending place. Here will be a table of grace for us where tears meet the greatest love and grace to tend to and emerge alongside death.

We will partake of Communion together as our nourishment for the ongoing journey. We come hungry in ways that we could not have know that we would be. We come as a church holding the liminal space between what has been and what is to be---if we truly can believe that this worst thing that has happened on the cross isn't the final thing to be.

Even in death, as Henri Nouwen reminds us, there is the hope that joins with the community of saints beyond what we can see. We need only weep when there is cause for weeping. We need only go forward where the portal stands open to follow Jesus.