

Dying to be resurrected

An Easter Meditation by Kat Wagner

Bible readings: Matt 27: 57-61 & Matt 28: 1-10

Hello, dear Peace Church sisters and brothers,

It is a great honour to share this Easter Day with you all!

The Easter story is one we probably all know so well. But this year, as our lives continue to be impacted by the pandemic, I feel more of a connection to the Easter story than ever before.

During Holy Week and Easter, we mark Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and burial, and then we celebrate the wonder of his resurrection. In some ways in this Corona-time, Easter is our lived reality: daily suffering; deaths of loved ones; burial of hoped-for plans; but are we yet catching glimpses of hope?

...hope for friendships refreshed with hugs, hope for family reunions, hope for job security, hope for a rest and a holiday, hope for a new kind of life. We have been through a lot, it has been tough. Many people have had their hearts broken. Many have reached the end of their resources. Many are crying out for relief. Many are exhausted from the worry and the uncertainty.

The women and men who followed Jesus through his arrest, and his trial, and his barbaric execution must have been exhausted, distraught and heart-broken too. They reacted in different ways. Some were overwhelmed by fear and ran away. Some were overcome with grief. Some were pragmatic, others were panicked. For them, there was no sense, no reason, no clarity, only death.

I would like us to take the opportunity to accompany Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (as she is referred to in our passage) in their experience of the very first Easter.

Luke tells us that the women who saw Jesus buried went home and rested on the Sabbath (Luke 23: 55-56). This *time between* Good Friday and Easter Sunday is a threshold moment, a liminal space, a true Sabbath, a time of rest and waiting.

Let us dwell here awhile – with the Easter Saturday mourners. For we cannot celebrate Easter resurrection without first dying and lying in the tomb.

I would like to lead you through an Easter Saturday contemplative practice:

In our gospel reading from Matthew (Matt 27: 60-61) we read: *Joseph (...) rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.*

Picture yourself, like Mary Magdalene, sitting outside the tomb of the buried Christ:
... watch patiently
... notice the large stone across the entranceway, but do not try to move it.
... in the presence of 'nothing', or even 'death', fill the tragic gap with pure presence.
... wait without answers.
... hope without evidence.
... accept your 'not knowing'.
... hold the space, without resolution or consolation.

I will lead you once more slowly through this practice.

If it helps, you may want to close your eyes, as you imagine yourself, like Mary Magdalene, sitting outside the tomb of the buried Christ:

... watch patiently

... notice the large stone across the entranceway, but do not try to move it.

... in the presence of 'nothing', or even 'death', fill the tragic gap with pure presence.

... wait without answers.

... hope without evidence.

... accept your 'not knowing'.

... hold the space, without resolution or consolation.

And open your eyes.
What did you see?
What did you notice?
How did it feel?

Maybe it was uncomfortable.
Maybe, you didn't want to be there.
Maybe, some 'negative' feelings arose: anger, frustration, hopelessness, emptiness, numbness.

This for me is a key message of Easter Saturday, that we must stay in the tomb, in this posture of prayer, until resurrection comes. Until our anger, fear or hopelessness is released; until they are exposed to the light, and we let them die.

Dag Hammarskjöld, who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (1953-1961), wrote this poignant reflection, which I feel describes the Easter Saturday experience so well.

He says:

*When all becomes silent around you, and you recoil in terror – (and you) see that your work has become a flight from suffering and responsibility, your unselfishness a thinly disguised masochism; hear, throbbing within you, the spiteful, cruel heart of the steppe wolf – **do not** then anaesthetize yourself by once again calling up the shouts and horns of the hunt, but gaze steadfastly at the vision until you have plumbed its depths.*

... until you have plumbed its depths.

In Romans 6 (v3-8), Paul explains: when we are baptised into Christ, it means that we let our old self be *crucified* with Christ; that the part of us that is ruled by sin dies; we have been *buried* with him into death; all in order that we might *live a new life*.

During his ministry, Jesus said, “A single grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die, in order for it to yield a plentiful harvest” (John 12: 24).

This seems to be the pattern of life that Jesus taught and demonstrated. Death is part of life. We cannot shortcut to a heavenly state. There is a gate that we must pass through. The road is narrow! We must go through Easter Saturday.

After resting for that long and sad Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary returned to the tomb. Just to be close to the one they loved. But with no warning, there is an earthquake! A bright dazzling angel! The stone is rolled back. Light floods into the empty tomb. And the words of the angel confirm what they see with their own eyes: “He is not here. He has risen”.

Alongside the creeping grey light of dawn, lightning-brightness illuminates a new resurrection reality.

(End of Part 1)

Lighting of candles

(Part 2:)

Here we are, with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, marvelling at the empty tomb. Wondering how life can come out of death.

And maybe, like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, we will leave the empty tomb and move forward feeling “afraid yet filled with joy” (Matt 28: 8).

One example of this pattern of death and resurrection is the water cycle. Think back to your geography lessons, and observe the journey taken by the water. As you listen, you may want to imagine how this journey of the water translates into your own life:

A droplet of rain falls (from a cloud), smashes into the ground, sinks, and is absorbed into its new world. It has joined the other fallen raindrops as groundwater, usually unseen and unnoticed, eventually making its way into a river: a channel flowing into something greater – the sea. And on a hot sunny day, that droplet (no longer separable from its companions) evaporates from the surface of the ocean through the air and transforms once again into cloud form.

The rain drop is changed in its nature by Nature itself. Form is *transformed*. Life is resurrected by Life itself. Resurrection is our universal pattern of life. Resurrection is our gift and our hope.

Psalms 30 v 5: “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning”.

And as the dawn sun grows stronger, with our mixed emotions of fear and joy, we are suddenly met by Jesus, who says: “Greetings! Do not be afraid. Go and tell...”. Here is the risen Christ showing us that love is stronger than death!

Maybe we have to die a thousand small deaths in our daily lives for us to see this.

So, what are we rejoicing in at Easter? For me...

- **Easter** is a sign that death never has the last word.
- **The crucifixion** is a sign that God knows and shares our pain and suffering.
- For me... **The occupied-and-then-empty tomb** is a sign that we must die in order to be released from death.
- **The resurrection** is a sign that we live forever with God.
- **Jesus’ bodily resurrection** is a sign that our bodies matter.

Even though our current day-to-day situation may still feel like we are in Easter Saturday (with Christ’s body waiting inside the closed tomb), let us be those people who hope in resurrection.

Let us be those who plumb the depths, and go deep enough to discover flowing groundwater: fallen water flowing together in unison to the sea.

Or as Martin Luther King Jr said, “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair a stone of hope”.

Let us be those who see love and life and potential in the fabric of the world around us.

Dag Hammarskjöld again:

The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak. Is this the starting point of the road towards the union of your two dreams – to be allowed in clarity of mind to mirror life and in purity of heart to mold it?

And this is our great challenge. How do we then live in the world in the light of resurrection? As the long night of Easter Saturday dawns into Easter Sunday, let us anticipate what it will be like to walk out from the darkness of the tomb (and the constraints of Corona restrictions) into a new way of life.

- How do we want to live?
- What have we learned 'inside the tomb'?
- How do we live as Resurrection People?

Now is a time to give thanks for all we have, and to celebrate:

Easter is here!

The long night of sadness is over.

The tomb is empty.

Christ has been raised from the dead!

Love lives!

Happy Easter!