

What Resurrection Looks Like

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The Interfaith Families Project
John 20:1-18

Easter looks a bit different two weeks after the fact. If your house is anything like mine, almost all of the hidden Easter eggs have been discovered. Now, unmatched tops and bottoms of plastic shells are all we find when we fish under the couch. Our lily has gotten a bit brown around the edges, and the egg decorating stuff is back in the basement. But that's not all that's different. The story of Easter sounds different two weeks later—it seems less like a proclamation and more like a provocation.

What do you expect to hear when you read the story of Easter? I don't know about you, but I expect to hear something big and loud and proud. Easter is, after all, the Christian church's biggest, loudest and proudest Sunday of the year. We pull out all the stops on Easter—we make sure every trumpeter in the greater metropolitan area is employed, and we find out what happens when you push the pedals on the organ all the way down to the floor. We parade around with banners and bonnets and generally make sure everyone knows for miles around that when it comes to the battle of life versus death, God is on the life team, and God will always, always win.

Who here has celebrated a victory recently? Have any of you won a soccer game this year? How about baseball? Kickball? Have any of you won at Old Maid? Uno? How about Monopoly? (Wait—no one actually wins at Monopoly, they just get worn out!) So, think of a time when you've won a victory, large or small. What kind of noise did you make? (Woo-hoo!) And what about your body? Did you do anything with your hands when you had your victory? Did you jump in the air at all? Do a dance? Would anyone like to demonstrate?

That's what we do when we're victorious. Keep those sounds, those gestures in mind, and let's think about the story of Easter, as it's told in the Gospel of John.

In this version of the story, Mary Magdelene comes to the tomb first, but when she discovers that the stone that had sealed the tomb tight has been moved, she turns around and gets a couple of male disciples to examine the situation. They return to the tomb and find various linen wrappings and cloths but no body, no Jesus. It says that one of the disciples not only saw these things, but "believed". And then what happened—did you hear? That was when the two disciples cheered, gave each other high fives, and ran back to town shouting "We've WON! God has done it! Life wins over Death! Jesus is alive!!!" You missed that part? Hmmm, so did the Gospel writer. According to the Gospel of John, what did the disciples do when they saw that Jesus' body was gone and believed that he was raised from the dead? That's right—they went home. End of story.

But then there's Mary Magdelene. She stands outside the tomb and only just peeps inside. Not only can she see that Jesus' body is missing, but she actually sees two angels and has a little conversation with them. But that's apparently not a clear enough signal that she should be celebrating, because a moment later, when she actually encounters the resurrected Christ, she's still crying. When he talks to her, does she start to smile? No! She thinks he's a gardener. It's not until he calls her by name does she realize who he is, and then, before she can scream with delight, give him a bear hug, join him in a victory dance, he says something that must have cut short any such inclination to celebrate: "Do not hold me!" Kind of a funny response to a big victory, isn't it?

It's hard to really hear this story in the midst of the fanfare of Easter morning. But two weeks out, some things start coming clear. This victory, this resurrection, isn't exactly like winning a soccer game. It's sounds different. It acts different. How?

Well for one thing, it's disguised. Mary Magdelene can look right at the resurrected Jesus, and think he's a gardener. Have any of you been gardening these past couple of weeks? What do you look like after an afternoon of raking and pruning and digging? Are you glowing with light, shining like the sun? Well, I'm sure not. We don't expect this of Jesus any more than Mary does, but if we attend to this story we'll be warned. Resurrection doesn't always wear the yellow jersey; resurrection isn't always on the highest podium with a large bouquet. Sometimes, this kind of victory is disguised.

And second, it's disturbing. As sad as Jesus' death was, it made sense. It followed a pattern that the disciples and Mary knew all to well. Life leads to death, especially for folks who stick their necks out in defiance to an Empire that has so much power and might. If we're going to understand what seems like utterly stupid behavior on the part of Mary and the disciples, we have to remember that all of us fit new information into an understanding of the way they world works that we carry with us. And one of the essential parts of our model of life is our understanding of what success looks like, what a winner acts like, what victory sounds like. We'll ignore a lot of challenges to our ideas about these things before we'll do the painful work of re-examining some of the assumptions we've built our own lives around. That is, in the end, how Jesus' resurrection challenged his disciples.

Third, it's delayed. The two disciples, as we mentioned, returned home after they saw the empty tomb. There is no mention of them telling anyone else what they had

seen. If you keep reading in John, you'll discover that the disciples actually witness the resurrected Christ later in the story, not just once, but several times. But they are in their room, or out in their fishing boats when Christ comes. They seem to have resumed their lives as they were before they ever met Jesus, and it takes a lot of convincing, a lot of miraculous encounters, before they say or do anything different. It's almost like they need time to let this new reality sink in. We know that they do eventually start to talk to others about their experiences, because the Christian church exists as a result. But if we let ourselves be schooled by this story, we will know that resurrection doesn't really make its impact in an instant. Sometimes, it's delayed.

Disguised, disturbing, delayed. When we pay attention to Easter, especially two weeks after the big day, we'll discover that these are the markers of resurrection; these are the signals of the kind of victory that God achieves. How would our lives be different if we kept a look out for resurrections of this kind, victories that are disguised, disturbing and delayed?

As I'm sure all of you know, the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, died this past week. One of the stories I heard told about the Pope this week during some of the retrospectives on his life and work was a story about an encounter he had as a young seminarian with a starving Jewish girl. Have any of you heard that story? Well, here's what happened in brief. In 1945, right at the end of World War II, the Pope was living in Poland and studying to be a Catholic priest. One day, he was in a train station, and he saw a young girl huddled in a corner. She was wearing the uniform of a prisoner in a Nazi work camp, and it turned out that she was a 13-year old Jewish girl named Edith Zierer. She had just been released from forced labor, and she was attempting to

relocate her family in Warsaw. But she had become so weak from hunger that she could no longer stand. The Pope treated her kindly—giving her tea to drink and food to eat, and eventually helping her get onto a cattle car of a train heading to Moscow.

Have any of you heard this story before? I have heard people refer to this experience as a transformational event in the life of the man who eventually became the first Pope to ever enter a synagogue, a leader in the work of reconciliation between Catholics and Jews. But this week, as I heard the story told again on NPR, I learned a few new details. For one thing, there was another Jewish family on that same cattle car, and when they saw Edith being cared for by a priest, they warned her that he might try to forcibly convert her. So, when they reached Moscow, Edith ran away from the Pope and hid from him. And I also learned that many years later, after that young seminarian became the Pope, Edith had tried to make contact with him. For several years, her letters to him went unacknowledged. It wasn't until 1998, 53 years after their first meeting, that the Pope invited Edith to visit him at the Vatican. He blessed her there, and I believe, was blessed by her in return.

So what do you make of that meeting in a train station in a small town in Poland in the middle of the winter of 1945. Would you call it victory? The word seems jarringly out of place. After all, there were still plenty of problems in Edith life, in post-war Poland and in the Catholic Church at the end of the story. Whatever change happened that day was disguised, it was disturbing to all parties involved, and it was delayed in its full realization. But something happened that day that both parties involved later acknowledged as resurrection. It was new life—a triumph of life, of goodness, of kindness, over all of the forces of death and destruction. And it mattered.

Two weeks out, Easter looks different. But if we notice what the victory of Easter really looks like—what it really sounds like and acts like—we will be more able to notice it in our world and in our own lives. It may be disguised, it may be disturbing, and it may be delayed, but I for one don't want to miss it.

It is really interesting to reflect on Easter two weeks after the actual celebration. Easter looks different from here.

Easter, as I celebrated it as a child, and as it is celebrated in most Christian churches, is a victory celebration. In the battle between God and death, God wins, and Jesus' resurrection is the proof. Easter hymns are filled with the images of victory: "The strife is o'er, the battle won..." "Up from the grave he rose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes..." "Love's redeeming work is done, fought the fight, the battle won..." Easter Sunday is big and loud and proud. If we had our doubts during the week before when we talked of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, we sing and pray loud enough on Easter to drown them out.

I like Easter—all of it. And while I am always aware of the difficulty the triumphal tone of Easter worship might have for my Jewish husband, this is one Sunday when I don't really feel like apologizing. The way I look at it, death gets to claim the headlines just about every other day of the year. We hear all the time about people getting killed, sometimes by the thousands, and on this one Sunday I like to hear the news shouted from the rooftops: The grave is not the goal! There is more to life than death! There is something more to talk about, something more to look forward to, and something more to give our attention to! There is life, people, and even life beyond death!

But this year, I didn't get a big, victorious Easter. I've been worshipping at Seeker's Church in Takoma Park this year, and their Easter, like many of their worship services, was quieter, more introspective, more focused and reflective than most Easter's I've experienced. And while this bothered part of me—part of me missed the grand to-

do—I am deeply grateful for the parts of the Easter story that showed through for me in this setting. I noticed a couple of things that I hadn't noticed before.

First of all, I noticed how strange Jesus post-resurrection comments are. He doesn't sound much like someone whose just won a big victory. "Do not hold me," he says to Mary. Not, "I did it! I'm back! Go tell those Romans that I beat them!" And the second thing I noticed is that the disciples don't seem much like people who've won a big victory, either. If anything, they seem disturbed by Jesus' resurrection. They are awed, they're amazed, but they don't exactly seem thrilled. In some of the Gospels, in fact, they're just plain terrified. It's almost like they wished Jesus' hadn't been

In the midst of the rush of Easter morning, it's