

## WANDERING HEART: FIGURING OUT FAITH WITH PETER<sup>1</sup>

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (MSG) ~ Luke 24:1-12

*"And I Hope"*

Resurrection of the Lord/Easter Sunday ~ March 31, 2024

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### *Introduction*

Perplexed. Confused. Taking care of necessary business. When a loved one dies, there is so much work to be done along with, and in the midst of, the grief. The numbing heart ache. That dark cloud of surreal space. And the swirl of questions for which there are no answers. Do you suppose those grieving women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary (the mother of James), and their friends, were chattering to themselves as they walked in the first morning light toward Jesus' tomb? "Did you remember the Nard?" "Wait, who was bringing the cloths?" "I hope we have enough water." Or maybe they were breathlessly recounting what they had heard about the trial. Just trying to sort out what had happened that Friday. Or maybe they were silent. Hearts too heavy for words. Just trying to focus on the next task at hand.

Who knows? We will never know for sure. But we *do know* grief. We *do know* loss. Our Easter story starts in a place most of us have been. A place where some of us may be right now. Let us listen to how this story is told in the Gospel According to Luke 24:1-12.

### *Sermon:*

"At 33 I knew everything. At 69, I know something much more important," reflects Anne Lamott in her most recent book titled, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love*. She elaborates: "My white-haired husband said on our first date seven years ago that "I don't know" is the portal to the richness inside us. This insight was one reason I agreed to a second date (along with his beautiful hands). It was a game-changer. Twenty years earlier, when my brothers and I were trying to take care of our mother in her apartment when she first had Alzheimer's, we cried out to her gerontology nurse, "We don't know if she can stay here, how to help her take her meds, how to get her to eat better since she forgets." And the nurse said gently, "How *could* you know?" This literally had not crossed our minds. We just thought we were incompetent. In the shadow of the mountain of our mother's decline, we hardly knew where to begin. So we started where we were, in the not knowing."<sup>ii</sup>

I begin with this, because *not* knowing is where our Easter story starts. In the emptiness, the confusion, the *not* knowing. And forgetting. The not remembering. Yes, Jesus had told them, more than once that he would be crucified and on the third day would be raised from the dead. Do you ever wonder why they didn't hear that part? The good part at the end? He had also told them about the good news at the end. That he would be raised on the third day. And yet, that didn't seem to register. I have always wondered about that. I know that I can be an annoyingly optimistic person. Ask my husband or my children. I do instinctively look for the bright side. The positive spin. Even when it is not helpful. So, yes: I love Easter! Easter is my jam, you might say. How could they have missed the part where he told them his death would not be the end of the

story. Like Anne Lamott, I am no longer 33, (actually more than double that by now) I am coming to understand better and better how easy it is to miss the most important point of what someone is saying to you. Especially when they are trying to tell you something that doesn't make sense. Something that seems unbelievably bad or good.

Like when the women came back from the tomb after finding it empty and told that the disciples the news that Christ had risen, what did the disciples say? They not only didn't believe the women, but they actually dismissed their news. Our translation says, "it seemed to them an idle tale." However, the real meaning of the Greek word translated here as "idle tale" is more literally "garbage." (Or supply your own word there, not said from the pulpit.) The women announce this most amazing news: Jesus' promises fulfilled. "Guys listen death did *not* win!" And how Jesus' closest friends respond? "Yeah, well, that's a bunch of rubbish." You have to love how much truth and honesty we have right here in the Bible. No attempt in this story to make the disciples look better or different than they were.

Leave it to our buddy Peter to respond by running. This time, not *away* from Jesus. But this time he runs *toward* the tomb to see for himself. Could it be? Peter was ready to be amazed. Ready to marvel at the wonder of God's love and power: to reverse death itself. Could it be that love really IS stronger than death. Could it be that God's ultimate judgment is resurrection? Peter didn't know. But rather than using his not knowing to dismiss this seemingly impossible possibility. He was willing to trust this news that seemed too good to be true.

How do we do that? Maybe it begins with acknowledging how little we know. Brian McLaren, in his book titled, *Faith after Doubt* he writes: "Acknowledging how little we know is, I think at the core of mature faith."<sup>iiii</sup> Maybe, as Anne Lamott has suggested, doing this gets easier as we get older. And more forgetful. Yet, at every age and stage, especially when we find ourselves in the midst of conflict, we can forget this core truth of who and whose we are. Paul thought he knew everything back when he was Saul and persecuting Christians. His brand new and bickering church in Corinth, were folks at the stage where they thought they knew everything.

That's why Paul reminds them in our first reading, to get back to the awesome story of grace, Love Divine, beyond the telling or knowing. It's not about whose spiritual gift is better than whose. Or who is doing it right. It's about building up each other in love, around this Divine Love that none of us understands completely. As Jesus said from the cross, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Especially when we think we know what we are doing. We usually do not. When Jesus told Peter that we have to forgive seventy-seven-times or seventy times seven, perhaps Jesus was anticipating his work on the cross. Forgiving all of us: seven times infinity. And we are called to do the same, beginning with saying "I don't know... Let's figure this out together."

Back in the 1960's a group of archaeologists excavated King Herod's temple at Masada. They found a pottery jar of seeds that turned out to be Judean date palm seeds. This was a tree that had been extinct for over 800 years. For another forty years these seeds were housed at a

university's archaeology case. Then in 2005, someone decided to try planting three of the seeds in Southern Israel and one seed sprouted! It grew to ten feet and is still alive and flourishing. True story: A seed that had been dormant for 800 years sprouted and has grown into a mature tree. Is that amazing or what? They didn't know, but somehow. Maybe those seeds could grow. And one did.<sup>iv</sup>

That gives me hope. Especially in the context of all the destruction and devastation both accidental and intentional swirling all over this world God sent Christ to save. Like the horror of the wreckage wrought by the container ship that slammed into a pillar of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore at about 1:30 A.M. on Tuesday-causing a long span of the bridge to crumple into the Patapsco River. Six people working to fill potholes were killed. And now more than 1,100 engineers are studying the wreckage piece by piece to figure out how to remove it. An accident almost too horrible to believe. As we move closer and closer toward the November 2024 US presidential election, we may feel like we are witnessing a slow-motion version of a container ship heading toward a pillar of the bridge on which our republic stands. Our country that we love and yearn for it to find its way from what looks like a collision course of dysfunction. And we hope. Somehow. We don't know how. But our death-defying God does.

Over 31,000 people has been reported as killed in the Israel-Hamas war since October 7. The number of children who have died is now more than 13,000. The level of hunger, the looming threat of famine, and severe malnutrition is staggering. The root of the conflict is deep and resists any clear path forward. And we hope. Somehow. We don't know. But we know that death does not have the final word.

More than 10,500 Ukrainian civilians have been killed over the past two years of war in Ukraine. With an average of 42 civilians killed and wounded every day since the conflict began. "In a recent interview, Ukrainian pastor Ivan Rusyn talked about the constant terror and uncertainty of life in his country. But he also said the conflict has helped the church to hammer out its vocation... His people have discovered a generosity and grit that is astounding. In his own life, Rusyn has agonized over prayers unanswered, over his anger at the violence and suffering. But then he said something surprising, "I will follow even if I don't understand. Whatever is lost. Will I survive? Will my family survive? I will follow anyway, somehow during this year my relationship with God has become more real... Something has gripped Rusyn and his church. They are being transformed amidst their grief and the very horror of evil, and they have hope Somehow—he can't explain it but it's true."<sup>v</sup>

Not knowing is both the beginning and the end of the Easter story. Or perhaps I should say the beginning and the future hope of the Easter story, which never ends. The future hope that is changing their present life. Not in what we know. But it is where Easter meets us. At the cross and the tomb. The hard road of forgiveness. New life, where we least expect it. Yet, somehow, someway we know enough to run toward it, like Peter. Let us run, as we are: astonished, confused, and amazed. By God's grace, we can. Easter people, this is our work! As Mary Oliver poetically describes in her poem titled, "Messenger," which I will close my Easter sermon with:

*My work is loving the world.*

*Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—  
equal seekers of sweetness.*

*Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.*

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,  
Which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.*

*The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,*

*which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.<sup>vi</sup>*

Christ is Risen! Hallelujah!

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<sup>i</sup> A Sanctified Art LLC/ sanctifiedart.org Lenten Theme 2024 Series.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/20/aging-acceptance-wisdom-albert-bierstadt/>

<sup>iii</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped working and What to Do About it*, (St. Martin's Press: New York, NY, 2021), p.76.

<sup>iv</sup> This story and the story from Ivan Rusyn are taken from a sermon by Rebecca Gurney, "Somehow" in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2024, pp. 28-31. She footnotes Tim Flannery, "The Tree Whisperers," from the *New York Review of Books*, May 24, 2018, regarding the ancient seed.

<sup>v</sup> Ivan Rusyn, "War and the Church in Ukraine: Part 2," *Plough Magazine* (March 25, 2023)

<sup>vi</sup> "Messenger" by Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, (Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 2006), p.1.