

John 20:1-18

*Seeking: Who Are You Looking For?*<sup>i</sup>

Resurrection of the Lord/Easter~ Sacrament of Holy Communion ~ April 9, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

### *Communion Meditation*

"Three days? If Jesus rose on the third day, then shouldn't Thursday be the day he was crucified? Since when was Friday afternoon to Sunday morning three days?" Just this past week, a young adult in our congregation (I won't embarrass him by divulging his name) asked me this question. It's a really good one. All Lent we have been engaged in the spiritual practice of seeking with honest and faithful questions. So, his question was right on theme.

You may have wondered about this too but kept it to yourself. It takes a certain kind of courage to ask a question about something that is so baked into the ecosystem of our faith—all the way back to the oldest of our Christian creeds, the Nicene and the Apostles' Creed. They both say, "On the third day he rose again." But if Jesus was crucified on a Friday afternoon and his resurrection happened before dawn on Sunday morning, at best that's about thirty-six hours. Last time I counted, thirty-six hours is not even two days.

What is up with these Christian holy days anyway? We call the night of the last supper, "Maundy Thursday" (come next year on Maundy Thursday to learn the answer to that riddle), then we take the absolutely hands down worst ever "terrible, horrible, no good very bad day" when Jesus was crucified and call it, "*Good Friday*." And now today, Easter, not more than thirty-six hours later, we say, "on the third day he rose again." You may be asking, how are we supposed to believe this stuff?

There is a simple explanation to the third day question. One that is easy to remember and may come in handy at Easter brunch later this morning, or at a bar tonight when you want to crush a game of Trivial Pursuit. There is also a second deeper explanation. It draws from the depths of our faith story and can sustain our famished spirits when we need to get through our darkest night. Let's be honest, we've all had them: A night, or a period in your life when it seems like dawn will never come and you don't know how we will get through it. We'll get to that part shortly.

First the simple explanation: I learned this from theologian, author, and Methodist elder, Justo L. Gonzalez, when I was studying at Columbia Seminary. In the ancient world, people counted days and years a lot like vacation clubs and cruises count days today. If you go on an "eight-day cruise," you leave late on Monday and return early next Monday. Even though you've had only six full days and part of two; the company advertises the cruise as "eight days" by counting parts of days as whole days.<sup>ii</sup> So, although definitely *not* a cruise for Jesus, nevertheless, he was dead in the tomb part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday which added up to three days for those who were around when it happened and started telling this story.

Here in FPC land, our “three days” from Good Friday to Easter started about fifteen minutes (maybe less) after we all exited the sanctuary in silence at the end of our Good Friday service. Into our bare and stripped-down sanctuary, a wonderful team of you all started wheeling in the daffodils, hyacinths, and lilies from the Fellowship Hall. The black cloth on the cross was switched out for the white one. In short order, our sanctuary got all dressed up in its Easter whites, on the pulpit, the lectern, and the communion table. Simultaneously, we switched out the somber Good Friday cello for the bright harmonies of our brass quartet rehearsing, filling the air with the rich and beautiful joyous sounds of triumph. Thank you, Team Easter!

There are good and practical reasons why we turn around the sanctuary directly following our Noon Day Good Friday service. But I think there’s more to it. Who isn’t eager to get to the victory part? The part where love wins, and death loses. This is the part of the story that makes us a church. God raising Jesus from the dead on the third day is the reason we even know about this story. Something that happened over 2000 years ago on the other side of our planet earth. Something that happened way before the dawn of telecommunications of *any* sort. No smart phones, no dumb phones, no phones, or screens at all. For centuries. And yet, here we are in Marshfield, Wisconsin in 2023, celebrating this story.

Did you know that Jesus wasn’t the first one to experience resurrection in three days? Yes, Jesus is the One and only Word made Flesh, God’s only Son, Emmanuel. But the Bible is filled with three-day stories of people going from some form of death and darkness into new life, new hope, a new perspective. Some form of salvation. Such as: Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac, until an angel offered a ram... on the third day. Or Joseph’s brothers who were thrown into prison and were released on the third day. Esther fasted and prayed against the genocide of her people, and the King Ahasuerus changed his mind... on the third day.

And then there was Jonah. The reluctant bratty prophet Jonah, who ran away as fast as he could from Nineveh only to be swallowed by a large fish (popularly known as a whale) for how long? Three days. Apparently in Jonah’s case, it was not a cruise-length three days. In Jonah 1:17 it specifies, “But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. After Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish, “the Lord spoke to the fish” (Jonah 2:10), and it regurgitated Jonah onto the shore. At which point Jonah made a beeline for Nineveh, where his one sentence sermon saved 120,00 people and many animals.

Why all these three-day stories throughout our scriptures, culminating in the ultimate three-day event of Jesus’ resurrection on the third day? I’m sure if we had the choice, we’d much rather go right from dark to light, from death to resurrection in two days, better yet fifteen minutes, or better still, please, let’s just skip the pain and darkness and suffering all together. But you and I know, that’s *not* how it goes. Not if we are being real or honest. We’ve all had “terrible horrible no good very bad days.” And when we raise our gaze upon the world, all we see is brokenness. And pain, first-hand and second-hand pain. We experience unspeakable grief and know of lives torn apart by the Covid-19 Pandemic, by war, by earthquakes and hurricanes. Also by gun violence, domestic violence, mental illnesses and disorders. Honestly, many of our days

are lived in the second day darkness. The day of waiting. Of wondering what's next. Or what happened. We replay over and over again self-fulfilling negative narratives about ourselves: "No matter what I do, I always mess everything up." Or negative narratives about our political and economic state, "this world is so messed up, how can it possibly get better?"

Beloved community, our Easter story in John 20 holds the answer we need this morning. Why? This story begins in darkness. Easter begins when it is still dark. Verse 1 reads, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark..." We may still be asking this morning: "How can it be Easter when it is still dark? When all I see and feel is numbness. The third day resurrection starts with staying, waiting, in the darkness. In today's story, it turns on the v. 11 "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. (Peter and John had run back.) But Mary stayed there alone. The tomb is empty. Christ has been raised from the dead. But no one knows that at first.

Especially not Mary Magdalene. (The only Mary named in all four gospel's Easter stories.) When she sees the stone rolled away she is sure that Jesus' body was stolen, she begins to weep. And doesn't stop. It's not just a moist eye, with a random tear. Or even a small stream of tears that might be called crying. She's sobbing. She's heaving. You know the kind of weeping where you can hardly get your breath between sobs? She is confused and upset, along with her grief at Jesus' death. Mary is so distraught that she's still crying when the man she supposed to be the gardener shows up in verse 15. At this point, it's still second day darkness for her, and it just got worse.

Especially in John's telling, we can see this is really a trauma story. Grief, shame, confusion. Jesus is dead. Whatever hope they had, gone. Look at how Mary's responses mirror our own experiences of trauma. First, she doesn't realize it's Jesus because in her mind he is dead. She came looking for a dead body, so, she this man had to be somebody else. She sees a man in the garden, so he must be a gardener. Next, she suggests to the gardener that somehow, she would have the ability to lift the dead body of Jesus: "Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." That sounds like trauma talking to me. It is at that point that Jesus calls her by name, "Mary!" And his familiar, beloved voice, calling her by name snaps her out of her traumatic fog. She recognizes him immediately, "Rabbouni!" He is not dead. His is alive.

And everything looks different: third day light dawning, through the darkness. She stayed. She waited. And then she saw her Lord, in the most spectacular and unexpected way. Still in shock. Or even more so. Did you notice how she doesn't really relay what Jesus told her to tell his disciples? She blurts out her first-person truth: "I have seen the Lord." I love that. This was Mary's truth that no one could take away from her. I'm sure she was still confused. Still had many unanswered questions. Yet seeing the Lord turned her grief stricken, trauma-infused world upside down.

Let's travel from the empty to right here where we are today. We may be asking our grief-stricken, trauma-infused spirits the same questions: How can it be Easter when it's still dark? We worship a God who is here with us, no matter how deep the darkness, holding our

hand through the night. We have a savior who cried out from the cross, in utter abandonment, "Where are you, God?" This was our Lord's final question before he died. When you get stuck in the second day—the part that seems to go on and on, with no light in sight, you are not alone. Jesus has been there, is there with you. Perhaps you feel stranded on an island, like Gilligan's Island: where what you thought something was going to be a fun three-hour tour turned into a habit of mind or body you just can't shake. Yes, YOU, can find Christ in the darkest of places. As Thomas Merton wrote in his book titled, "The Sign of Jonas (Jonah), *"Even our mistakes are eloquent, more than we knew."*<sup>iii</sup> Look for the Risen Christ. And wait.

If you don't believe this story or have trouble believing in this resurrection stuff. Come back next week! We are Easter people and look for the resurrection in the most unlikely places. A different kind of Easter hunt. One to which we are called every day. One which we can find in one another. Who are you looking for? We have a Table to which our Risen Lord invites you. If you yearn for a world and life where Love wins, you have come to the right place. I will let pastor, preacher, author Barbara Brown Taylor have the last word, where the second day takes 17 years, she compares Jesus' tomb to the little wonder of nature, the cicada. She writes, "The tomb was just the cicada shell with the neat slit down its back. The living being that had once been inside of it was gone. The singing was going on somewhere else... He had outgrown his tomb, which was too small a focus for the resurrection. The risen one had people to see and things to do. The living one's business was among the living... Every time he came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him."<sup>iv</sup>

Would you like to become *stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring*? Come to the Table of grace. Let this story make a difference for you, for us, today, tomorrow, and the next day.

---

<sup>i</sup> The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Apostles' Creed for Today*, (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 55-56.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Merton, *The sign of Jonas*, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1953, 1981), pp. 10-11.

<sup>iv</sup> See Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon: <https://www.religion-online.org/article/escape-from-the-tomb-jn-201-18/>