Easter Day

April 16, 2017

Susan L. Davidson

All Saints’ Wolcott

*I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*

Easter is the centerpiece of the Christian faith. If it weren’t for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we would have no reason to gather here today, surrounded by flowers and music and alleluias. And yet, our faith rests on a mystery. There is simply no science which can provide for us proof of that event. The only proof we have is in relationships – in the witness we have in Scripture of encounters with the risen Jesus which members of his community had after they had seen him dead on the cross and buried in the tomb. The first of those encounters was with Mary Magdalene.

She came to the garden alone, says John. She came weeping; bearing myrrh to anoint the body of her beloved Lord for burial. It was the proper thing to do. There had been no time on Friday, before sunset signaled the beginning of the sabbath rest, to do those things which ought to be done; no time to do more than watch his lifeless body be taken down from the Cross and laid in its borrowed tomb; no time then to anoint his limbs with anything other than her tears. And then everybody else had scattered; they were in hiding, afraid for their own lives. And so she came quietly, in the dark hours before the dawn, slipping into the garden to complete the burial rites. As she did, she also stepped into God’s design for the re-creation of the world, as the author of the Gospel of John understands the story. John is the Evangelist who alone tells the story of salvation as the account of the Incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, through whom all things were made. It is John who begins his Gospel account in language deliberately parallel to the opening of the Book Genesis, in which we hear of the Creation of the world and the heavenly cosmos, the establishment of the Garden of Eden, and the creation of our first ancestors, male and female. It can be no accident that John sets this discovery of the resurrection of Jesus in a garden, where a man and a woman encounter one another as light dawns on the first day of the week – the day on which Genesis says light was first created out of darkness – and where God is hard at work carrying out the plan of Salvation, by creating new life in the Garden of the Resurrection.

Surely Mary Magdalene never thought of herself as the new Eve. She was overcome with grief over the loss of her friend and teacher, and couldn’t think much at all. That grief was doubled when she found his tomb empty and the body of her friend and rabbi gone. She had to go and get Jesus’ closest disciples out of their hiding place to corroborate the emptiness of the tomb. So distracted was she by her grief the she seemed unimpressed by the sudden appearance of two angels who spoke to her. Her own poignant words bring familiar tears to the eyes of anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” As she turned around, she came face to face with Jesus, although she seemed not to recognize him through her tears.

She thought he was the gardener. Well, and so he is, in a theological sense – the Creator of all gardens and all green and growing things, and all life and light and beauty. (I think this is a very clever pun by Joh on the word “gardener.”) And here is where Jesus then acts as God: he calls her by name. “Mary,” he says, and as he calls her name, she recognizes him and recognizes the astounding truth of the resurrection. She was one of the few, Scripture tells us, who had stayed with him under the Cross and watched him die a humiliating death. She had seen him buried in the borrowed tomb. And here he was, standing in front of her and calling her by name. Mary Magdalene is transformed by that encounter from myrrh-bearer to mission-bearer. From that moment, she becomes the first apostle, the first person sent by Christ to bear the Good News of new life to a world which seems bent on self-destruction. We owe our faith today to her and to others like her, who have proclaimed that Good News throughout the ages.

There are many legends about Mary Magdalene. One of my favorites is described by this icon of her which will sit in the Conference Room for Eastertide. According to an ancient Eastern tradition, Mary Magdalene was a wealthy woman from whom Christ expelled seven “demons.” During his ministry she was one of those who followed him and helped support him and his other disciples with her money. The Eastern tradition tells us that after Jesus’ Ascension she journeyed to Rome where she was admitted to the court of Tiberias Caesar because of her high social standing. After describing how poorly Pilate had administered justice at Jesus’ trial, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. To help explain his resurrection, she picked up an egg from the dinner table. Caesar responded that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand could turn red, which it promptly did! This is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East and perhaps the beginning of other colored Easter eggs in Western Christianity.

All four Gospel accounts, as well as the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul tell us with the certainty born of witnesses to the truth that Jesus – God in our own flesh - indeed did walk and talk and listen and laugh and teach and heal and suffer and die on this earth, and that three days later he rose from the dead. I believe in the resurrection of the body because of the firm witness of so many of my ancestors in the faith. And I believe that because Jesus – fully God and fully human - rose from the dead, you and I will, too. “This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes,” as the psalm (118:23) says.

Can I prove it? No. And that’s where faith abides. I trust that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17). At the end of his Gospel, John says that he has written his words “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.” (Jn. 20:31).

All of us want to know what, *exactly*, happened in the darkness of that borrowed tomb? Perhaps one day, we will know, when Jesus speaks our own names and stands before us in our own gardens of the resurrection. For now, here is one person’s poetic imagining of those three days. Peter Venable is a retired mental health and addiction counselor; he volunteers at a prison camp, senior center, and food pantry, and sings in the annual December Messiah where he lives in North Carolina. He has surely met Jesus in those places, as we do in one another, and in all the places of our own lives. Here is his vision of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, Creator, Redeemer, and everlasting lover of the world, the universe, the cosmos, black holes, earth and all stars, galaxies and gardens, and you and me. He titles his poem “Science Fiction.”\*

Science Fiction

Skewered on a post and beam, he groaned and writhed pleaded

sweated out bled out, and breathed out his last

and his spirit – zero mass and pure energy –

began streaking past the moon, Jupiter’s spot, Pluto . . .

faster than gamma rays, solar tsunamis,

through neutrino hearts and black hole maws

past Andromeda’s suburbs and event horizons

into the blackest oblivion at -4550

infinitely faster than photons

across fifty-billion light years

in a billionth of a second . . .

to brake in a sunless place

of luminosity, with simmering beings

floating towards him like cygnets to a swan,

feathery warmth on his face.

He zoomed back, tearing through space strings

the way a spark does through a thread,

through Europa’s krill and moon’s shadow,

into a punctured corpse chilled on a stone ledge.

He sat up, breathed,

brushed aside a massive rock

and walked into dawn’s light.

Amen.

\*- “Science Fiction,” by Peter C. Venable. Printed in The Anglican Theological Review, Vol. 98, No. 4, Fall, 2016. P. 726.