



The Avenue Uniting Church

Easter Reflections, 2024

Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Mark 15:33-41

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My GOD, my GOD, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.'

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was GOD's Son!'

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem

"Mary's Story..." from John Chapter 20

Mary of Magdala had been one of Jesus' friends. Mary didn't run away when the rulers killed Jesus. She and some of the other women disciples stayed near Jesus all the time that he hung on the cross. Mary wanted so much to help Jesus. But the soldiers wouldn't let her. Now Jesus was dead. Mary felt as if she had died too.

Early on Sunday morning, on the third day after Jesus had been killed, Mary went to the place where they had put Jesus' dead body. But when she got there, she saw that Jesus' body was gone.

Mary was very upset. She ran to call some of Jesus' other disciples. They came running as fast as they could. They too saw that Jesus' dead body wasn't there any more.

Jesus' other friends didn't know what to do, so they went home. Mary stayed behind. She wanted to be by herself for a while. She wanted to have a good cry. Mary was very sad about all the things that had happened to Jesus.

While she was crying, she looked into the place where they had put Jesus' body. She saw two angels. The angels asked her, "Why are you crying?" "They have taken Jesus away," said Mary. "And I don't know where they have put him."

Then Mary turned around, and she saw somebody standing there. She was still crying, and the tears in her eyes made it hard for her to see who it was.

"Who are you looking for?" this person asked. "And why are you crying?" Mary cried even harder. "If you have taken Jesus away, please tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

"Mary," he said.

As soon as she heard her name, she knew who it was.

"Teacher!" she shouted. She was so happy!

Witness to the Word

"Courage to Die..."

(Good Friday)

Yehoshua, son of Yohoseph, did not just die.

He was executed by cruxifixion, along with many others regarded by Rome as criminal. Political or religious criminal, common thief, or murderer, it made no difference to Rome.

Crucifixion, the great equaliser!

Yehoshua's life was done away with, with little more than the blink of an eye. That's how Empire works – how it's always worked, and still does. You stick your head up, or start to gather a following, you get watched. And if what is seen, is not liked, well, your life becomes... complicated, and often short.

Yehoshua – or Jesus, as we know him – had been watched for a while, because he and his small band had begun to be noticed. And not just by Rome either, or the local enforcers of "*Pax Romana*" – peace... Roman style!

The religious authorities were keeping close tabs on him too, and the things he was saying and doing in the name of GOD. And they didn't like it! He was upsetting their authority, and disrupting the way things were done.

Jesus was no fool, he knew the opposition he was arousing.

Maybe it seemed strange to him that preaching of an inclusive GOD, or that touching people with leprosy, or that associating with people regarded as sinners and the dregs of society, might become capital offences.

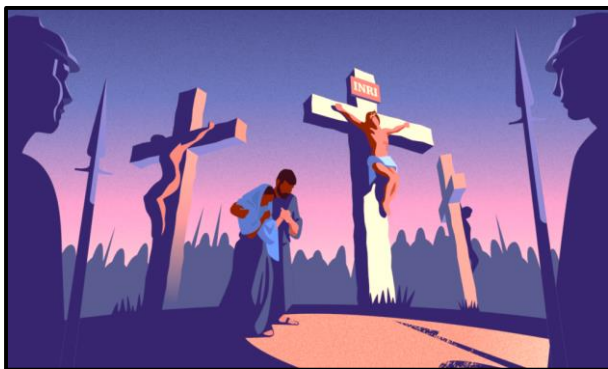
But he'd have seen that this was the case, and that each story about him that got around, each time a crowd gathered around him, the ground beneath him got shakier. And yet, he kept going!

I believe that at some point in that final few days, his courage to live his calling, conviction - obsession even – became courage to die, if that's where it was going to take him.

I'm not saying he had a death –wish, or anything like that: clearly the stories of his anguish in Gethsemane show he didn't want to die. But it seems to me, that his convictions about the way of GOD in the world were so strong that they overtook everything, and he just refused to stay quiet. – or go away.

In the face of such courage, I stand humbly. I don't know if I have the courage to die for my convictions, and I hope I never have to find out.

But it's not only the courage to die that humbles me today. It's the courage he showed in dying as he had lived: meeting brutality and apathy with compassion and grace, and faithfulness to his calling.



"Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing".

"Today you will be with me in paradise"

"Mother, here is your son. Son, here is your mother. Look after each other"

Perhaps I could say more words.
But I think it's better that I stop,
and invite us to be silent
for a few minutes before this cross of courage...

"Courage to Live"

(Easter Day)

An Easter Prayer

Larry Peacock

GOD of openness and new life, in this Easter season,
Remove me from the tombs of doubt and despair,
turn me from dead ends and shattered dreams,
and lead me to new hope and a bright tomorrow.

Walk with me down uncharted roads and ordinary paths,
always leading me to a deeper trust and more faithful service.
I open my heart to Easter joy.

I invite you to take a few moments with this picture:
What do you notice?



Larry Peacock is a wise man. A gentle man.
A deeply spiritual man of GOD. Larry is a retired minister of the United Methodist Church in Portland, Oregon. He greeted us at the Portland airport with a big hug, a smile... and lunch. He became a friend.

Before we came home, Larry gave me a book he'd written: Openings. It includes readings and thoughts for each day of the year, with extras for the various seasons of our faith and year.

I began this Witness with the prayer for March and the Easter Season: I read it some weeks ago and was struck by two lines in particular:

*GOD of openness and new life, in this Easter season,
Remove me from the tombs of doubt and despair,*

The idea of asking GOD –however I understand GOD – to remove me from tombs, struck me as strange at first: Why would I need help to leave those tombs? Surely I'd be on my feet and ready to go as soon as a crack of light appeared?

The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that leaving a tomb can be hard work – too hard sometimes!

Clearly, I'm not talking about leaving a tomb in the physical sense here – wherever my body ends up when I've finished with it will be final.

Larry's words, invited me to think about the less permanent – symbolic – tombs that we can find ourselves in throughout our lives: tombs that can take many years and lots of energy to leave behind.

Thinking about this lead me to give our Easter services the shared theme **"*Courage to die... courage to live.*"**

Friday focused particularly on the courage of Jesus to follow his conviction and calling, knowing the likely consequences.

Those there that day might remember me standing humbly before the cross, and wondering if I have the same courage.

But it takes courage to live, too! Resurrection – new life – takes courage as well!

I know that's not how it's presented in the Gospels: the stories of Jesus' resurrection there are all about appearances and glory, and that's appropriate.

But those around him are called to new life as well:

- to reflect his resurrection in theirs.
- to leave behind their tombs of despair and defeat,
- to live! fully, creatively, compassionately, faithfully – as he had!

Perhaps the best example is the locked upper room resurrection story, where they are met by "*Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, I now send you*"

And its sequel, where Thomas needs to leave the tomb of disbelief – and does so with passion and enthusiasm!

We also see the Emmaus story, where Mr and Mrs Cleopas are invited to leave their tomb of despair, when they recognize Jesus in shared hospitality and the breaking of bread.

These are not just stories told for the sake of it. They are stories of people being freed and inspired into new life, full life, resurrection life.

They are stories of people taking up the courage to live!

Such courage can be hard work.

It can be incredibly difficult to leave the cave of grieving for a loved one.

It takes much more than simply "*cheering up a bit*" to leave the tomb of anxiety and depression – mine is pretty mild, but some days the temptation to pull up the blankets and stay in bed is pretty overwhelming.

It takes courage to step out of the tomb of self-doubt.

Sometimes it's easier to sit in the tomb and darkness of addiction, especially when there doesn't seem to be any way out

And many people, in all kinds of situations, have to leave the tomb again and again and again!

So, what might we take with us from today, in the midst of the life within us and all around us? What's the Easter good news?

Well, for me, it's that we don't travel the road by ourselves.

In Mary, in Peter, John, in Thomas, and the others, we have a story that speaks to us of new hope, and the courage to take up new life!

It's an old story, for sure, but a story that that has picked up many others through the centuries of its telling.

In that community that has pointed and continues to point beyond itself to the life in all life, I find the courage to think about the 'tombs' that hold me, and what I might do about that.

And I give thanks for the fellow travellers who walk this path, people like Larry, and people like you, who've found the courage to leave behinds some tombs – and lived to tell the tale!

Happy Easter!