

It is Easter even. We are the evening people. For whatever reason, some of us prefer to worship late in the day when the shadows are lengthening and the merging of day into night begins. I came for Compline for the first time a few Sundays ago and wished I had started coming sooner in the dark and the quiet, the candles soft, the music of flute and cello and voice at times angelic. The music of our five o'clock cantor and pianist is deepening and meditative, unlike the loud Easter morning bursts of organ.

I'm not a morning person. I am not either a person for special occasions. Not for Christmas or even birthdays so much as celebrating the presence of joy in our ordinary lives.

But then, having said that, the first day of spring sun, To be surprised by joy, especially in this joyless political and military atmosphere, took me, on that first warm sunny day, into an energy and connection with life I had not felt in a long while. Many of us felt struck into low grade depression by too much dim winter. By too much gloom: last week's *Atlantic Monthly* had two scary articles, one about "How a New Jobless Era will Transform America" and one about cyberwar on America's electronic networks that could cause the collapse of financial life, the halt of most manufacturing systems, and the evaporation of all the data and knowledge stored on the Internet. Dark.

Dark is Lenten. During this dark week, you may have gotten in touch with some of your fears. About your child or grandchild being graduated from college into this fearful job market. About yourself in

this job market. Fears about your own health as you bear the burden of caring for an older relative or friend: you may be part of the healthcare crisis for the middle aged and elderly in this country that can be extremely isolating.

We are not usually people of gloom. We are evening people. That is different. Things of the spirit, for me, rise often out of the gloaming. But Easter day bursts upon us at morning. This morning event breaks into our world, into our ordinary time. And I remember the most joyous Easters of my youth which began with “Welcome Happy Morning!” Brightness of the morning/Vanquisher of darkness/Bring again our daylight/Day returns with thee!

When I was a young girl in the St. Mark’s choir, the world seemed full of hope and love. Hope dwelt in my friendships and my books, the whole world waiting for me. Somehow it was woven into this exciting religious world of white surplices, Gothic arches, stained glass windows and slighter older crucifers as removed from us (by a few years in age and such responsibility) as the crossing guard at Emmet Field school. Love sat right behind me in the choir pews: one of my first boyfriends who could hit the high note in O Holy Night with ease and thrilling beauty. All during choir practice and even during services, little scribbled notes were passed between him and me, up and down the choir rows, hidden by the long white sleeves of our cohorts in crime.

Welcome Happy Morning expressed my repressed longing to embrace the world and maybe to embrace him (something I never did)! And it was all wound up with Jesus who smiled on us.

Remembering all that is what we call nostalgia. It is the left brain working because the left brain looks forward and backward. When Jesus is resurrected and turns into the Christ, the post-Easter Jesus, we connect with him through our right brain: the place of timelessness and peace, the place we don't want to leave. A place that feels like heaven. A seminarian complained to me recently that she had lost her worshipping self in seminary. We explored the possibility she is spending all her time in classes using her left brain. In the right brain words don't matter, nor past nor future. It is now. Here.

It is a place of bliss. Many of us have had such right brain or mystic experiences for a minute or for longer. Sometimes they are so transporting and assuring that we try to find them again, try to recover joy. This evening you may say to yourself, "I want to rediscover joy, and long for the bursting forth of Easter into my own life." Like the disciples wished to find the One who had left them, you may wish to find the One who has left you.

You'll pardon me if I suggest that may not happen for you if your faith is based on the left brain facts of what happened at the tomb as if they were history instead of parable. One problem with a factual reading of this Easter story is that it requires a "supernatural interventionist" understanding of the way God relates to the world, that we think of the

stones being rolled away by God or an angel and that we think of God removing the corpse of Jesus so that it was no longer in the tomb. But does God ever act this way? Another difficulty is that a literal reading of these texts suggests that Easter is totally unique, that God had not done this sort of thing anywhere any time else, and thus it privileges Christianity as the only true or full revelation of God, the only way.

Can we just agree that whether there was one angel or two or whether the disciples were in Jerusalem or Galilee, the tomb really was empty? Probably not. Although Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan agree this was because God transformed the corpse of Jesus (and not, for example, because somebody stole the body or somebody went to the wrong tomb), I know Jack Spong doubts there was any empty tomb ever.

We do know one thing for sure: that Without Easter we wouldn't know about Jesus. He might have been a footnote in Josephus' historical account and nothing more. Forgotten.

But if we hear or read the Easter stories as if they were reporting events that could have been photographed, that gets in the way of understanding them. It is a stumbling block for people who think they must believe these stories are historically factual to be Christians.

“Probably more people have left the church because of biblical literalism than any other reasons.” So we often do not get beyond the question, “Did these stories happen or not?” to the question “What do they mean?”

Paul, who wrote sixteen or eighteen years earlier than the first gospel, grounds his confidence in Jesus' resurrection, not on the empty tomb, but on the appearances to his followers and ultimately to Paul himself, which Paul understands as visions. "I have seen the Lord," Paul writes. "He appeared also to me."

What did experiencing Jesus alive mean to the ones to whom he appeared? Having confronted the powers that be, having embraced in love rather than in hatred these powers that be, and having died in doing so, Jesus was still alive with them and in them. His new body, what Paul called Jesus' mystical body, would carry on.

It seems to me that what *we* want is to experience Jesus alive. To experience the presence of the living God. Perhaps to find again the Jesus, the God of our childhood. To find again the Jesus, the God of our peak experiences, our sudden revelations, our joy. To find again the Jesus who once appeared when we were in despair. To find again the Jesus who walked at our side.

In the very next verse of Luke, the one that follows right on today's gospel, we hear the first of two appearance stories. Two followers of Jesus are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about seven miles away, at the end of the day that we call Easter. They are joined by a stranger they do not recognize. The three walk together for some hours.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. . . Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is real presence. The risen Lord opens up the meaning of scripture. The risen Jesus journeys with us, whether we know it or not. There are moments in which we *do* come to know him and recognize him.

Jesus lives. He continues to be experienced after his death, though in a radically new way. Jesus-become-Christ is no longer limited by his own physical body nor by time or space. He is alive in the flesh-and-blood lives, in the daily decisions and actions, of those who have experienced him and chosen to follow him. What does experiencing him alive mean to you? How is he known to you?

Our Easter story began very early in the morning, at dawn as the sun was making its way up the sky, but now it is almost evening. We watch the skies darken into twilight. We say to the risen Lord, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." Be known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Their experience of the raised Jesus, if not the raised Jesus himself, was an event that *did* occur in time and history
His appearances meant everything to his disciples, consoled and guided them. What is important to us are our own experiences of the risen Christ.

Jesus died for the love of what is, not a love of what could be. Eventually they realized that such a sacred love liberates what is. Although at the time, Jesus perhaps only prayed and hoped, that the God of compassion he believed in would, somehow, draw life out of dying.

The truly sacred is the love of what is, not a love of what could be. This love liberates what is.

The God of compassion he believed in would, somehow, draw life out of dying.

And in the resurrection, his followers realized that this is exactly what happened. Having confronted the powers that be, having embraced in love rather than in hatred these powers that be, and having died in doing so, Jesus was still alive with them and in them. His new body, what Paul called Jesus' mystical body, would carry on.