

Practice Resurrection

They did not see it coming. Maybe they should have. After all Jesus had told them, and more than once. But after that all-too-quiet Sabbath, on the heels of that horrific Friday, the women do the only thing they know to do, the one thing they are practiced at: They come to the tomb to tend to the dead. Luke does not tell us which spices they bring, but I imagine they are the same spices their mothers and grandmothers have taught them to use, a ritual handed down through the generations. They have prepared the spices, and they are prepared to use them. They have walked this way before, too, of course. Just before sundown on Friday, they followed Joseph of Arimathea as he took Jesus' body to the tomb. They remember the way; they know the steps, where the rocks are, where the road bends; they know the stone cold quiet of the tomb. It's all all-too-familiar at this point. And then they show up, and the body is nowhere to be found. They aren't prepared for this. They have not practiced resurrection before.

But the men in dazzling clothes—angels they are later called—tell them to remember Jesus' words. They *do* know resurrection, the men insist, or the promise of it at least: "Remember how he told you when he was still in Galilee..." Like a parent rehearsing lines with her daughter, like friends helping each other memorize the periodic table for a chemistry test, Jesus has been rehearsing this good news with them all along, repeating it over and over again. But somehow they haven't heard it. Maybe they have to hear it again in the light of the empty tomb. Maybe they need the angels' words to break through their grief and help them remember. And much like practicing those lines for a play or memorizing those boxes on the periodic table, maybe they have to say the words out loud for it to begin to sink in, to get deep down inside their very souls. Maybe saying it out loud helps them remember. I picture them rehearsing the story again and again as they head back to the others, trying to make sense of the news before they share it with the others. I picture them practicing it down to the last detail. And even when they find the words to tell what they have seen, the disciples don't buy it.

The word translated “idle tale” in our text is used only once, only here in all of scripture. It means garbage, a load of hooey, fake news. It is a harshly dismissive word, a hard word. The eleven utterly discount what the women tell them. In their defense, the disciples aren’t prepared for resurrection either, of course. They have no experience with it; they are not practiced at it either. And yet their response to the women seems a bit over-the-top, almost hostile. Death and defeat have become so second nature that they leave almost no room for resurrection. Like a language the disciples have never heard spoken, the women’s news sounds foreign to their ears.

Except for Peter, maybe. He’s torn it seems, but he—more than any of the others perhaps—has reason to remember. Only hours before Peter remembered Jesus’ words about his coming denials. The cock crowed, and Peter remembered Jesus’ words. And he wept. Bitterly. Now the women have given him a chance to remember some of Jesus’ other words, words that made no more sense than Jesus’ predicting his denial...until now. Peter couldn’t imagine denying his beloved Rabbi, nor could he imagine resurrection. Before Friday, he had no experience of either one. It is not something he has ever practiced before. And resurrection takes practice.

Or so says, the poet Wendell Berry. At the end of one of his beautiful poems, Berry urges us to “practice resurrection.”¹ How do we practice resurrection? Is it like practicing medicine or piano? Maybe it’s like a child trying to ride a bike. Maybe it’s like an amputee whose doctors said she’d never walk again, let alone run the Boston Marathon. Maybe it’s like a baby giraffe trying to walk on his wobbly legs.

Just over five years ago, over 1 million people watched as April the giraffe gave birth to a healthy baby boy. In case you missed it or have forgotten, April was on a livestreamed video feed for two months. Cynics wondered if it was its own kind of fake news, an April Fools’ joke of sorts. Still others thought it was inappropriate viewing for some audiences. And yet there were significant reasons for focusing so much attention on April. More than a simple publicity stunt, April’s televised labor drew attention to the fact that giraffes had quietly slipped on to the endangered species list over the previous few decades.² The birth of a healthy calf was a sign of hope for the giraffe family. More than that, it was a sign of hope for the human

¹ Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

² <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/giraffes-silently-slip-endangered-species-list-180961372/>

family, too. In a broken and divided world, witnessing the birth of this little one and celebrating his arrival together brought hope in the midst of troubled and troublesome times.

Or maybe to practice resurrection is to follow the witness of our brothers and sisters in Lahore, Pakistan in the wake of the bombing on Easter six years ago. On Easter of 2016, I returned to my office and sat down at my computer to tie up the last few loose ends, and saw the news pop up on my screen. A few days later, Veda Gill, Executive Director of the Presbyterian Education Board in Pakistan, confirmed her experience of the news that after a peaceful and joyful Easter morning, a suicide bomber walked into a nearby park and detonated himself near some children's carnival rides just a short distance from her home. An anonymous caller confirmed that Christians were the target, although most of the victims were Muslim. Like many others, I wanted it to be fake news, but it wasn't. In the wake of this attack and others, it would be understandable if the church in Pakistan gave up, went underground and into hiding, and yet, that is not how they practice resurrection. In a letter to friends and supporters, Veda wrote:

We strongly believe that there is a day to die. We are not going to die of fear every day. Life goes on with *HOPE, TRUST, AND FAITH IN THE LORD*.³

Life goes on. It is not simply a matter of swallowing the pain or the fear. It is not a matter of just getting over it. No one just gets over trauma or terror. Resurrection urges us not to let the trauma or the terror have the final word. Resurrection acknowledges death—there is no resurrection without death after all, and resurrection moves us forward and back out into the world where God is at work stubbornly and faithfully bringing life. Ground was broken for a new boys' high school in Lahore the following November, just over 6 months after the blast. To date this mission has served well over 6000 students—both Christian and Muslim. These students have gone on to become servant leaders who practice resurrection in the face of death and fear in a world that is all-too-well-practiced at both.

Over the past few weeks, we have walked with Jesus to Jerusalem, to the cross, and then here, to the empty tomb. Each stop along the way has given us a chance to remember who Jesus is and who we are in his name; to practice what he preaches, to practice resurrection. We need to be clear. It's not a matter of practice-

³ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/3/30/presbyterian-partner-pakistan-sends-update-lahore/>

makes-perfect; instead, we practice in order to remember whose we are; we practice in order to proclaim who he is. Because, like the women at the tomb, we too have good news to share. Like them we are entrusted with good news, the best news. Like them we are called to go and proclaim the good news we have heard.

And you and I know how hungry our world is for good news. Maybe that explains a bit about the fervor over April the giraffe. On that long Holy Saturday five years ago, I found myself holding my breath as she calmly walked around her stall. I wanted to help her push, and I wanted the delivery to go well. I didn't realize how badly I wanted, how badly I *needed* the news to be good. I guess we are all hungry for good news, just as we are hungry for joy. And joy—true joy, deep down joy can be hard to come by. In that same poem, Berry also dares us to, “Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”⁴ These are the facts from that first Easter morning: Rome is still in power, the disciples are in hiding, an innocent man has been executed, and yet—as the women insist and Peter discovers, the tomb is empty. Death has not won.

Today's facts are not all that different: Wars rage and threaten to rage around the world. Marriages are struggling. Addiction and mental illness hold too many in their clutches. Communities are on edge. Families are divided. Shouts of hatred, suspicion, and anger have all but silenced voices of kindness, civility, love, and welcome. And, the tomb is still empty. The fact remains that this is God's broken world, **and** this is God's beloved world. Death does not have the final word; God does. And in Jesus Christ, God chooses to speak not simply a Word, but **the** Word of hope over despair, love over hate, life over death.

Some will write us off; others will say it's a load of hooey; and yet, there are others who just might remember a word they heard somewhere once, some who now hear the slightest kernel of hope in our words that invites them to go and see what we have seen. And maybe we'll find a way to put one wobbly foot in front of the other as we return from the tomb to practice resurrection together, to walk on amazed and maybe a bit joyful, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Berry