

ENCOUNTERING THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20: 1-18

Have you ever encountered the risen Christ?... Ok, some of you may be thinking, what kind of question is that, preacher?... Well, for those of us with some evangelicalism in our background, this kind of questioning can feel familiar. But for others of us, such questioning may feel disorienting if not alienating... Jesus lived 2000 years ago. What can encountering Christ really mean for us today?

Well, on this Easter Sunday morning, and given our gospel reading, perhaps such questioning deserves deeper reflection. Let's see where we're taken, shall we?

Why would the story in our gospel reading be given to us? The gospel of John is written over 60 years after the events being narrated. Even if we believe that Mary and, later, the other disciples actually encounter the risen Christ in some personal kind of way, what difference would that make to people generations later? And what kind of encounter would we call it even if we, too, claimed we had an encounter with the risen Christ in some way?

Well, what was happening in Mary? And what about the other disciples? They had just witnessed the most horrific torture and execution of their beloved Lord and hoped for saviour of their people, and in a most publicly humiliating kind of way too... Can you imagine the crisis of faith they must have been undergoing? Can you imagine how totally crushed would be their hope? Can you imagine the fear and for some of them the shame they would be experiencing after having run away and abandoned one to whom they had claimed absolute loyalty come what may?

Any crisis and any traumatic experience in our lives moves in and through us in all kinds of ways... There is sometimes guilt and shame that we can carry about what has happened and our role in it all... There is often fear and a loss of faith and hope, and this can lead us towards hopelessness and despair... We can become isolated and alone in our pain and hurt because we find it hard to make sense of it all let alone find ways to express something about it that doesn't put people off and push them away... There is also the drive to suppress negative experiences so we can cope and function even as sometimes the negativity seeps out of us in all kinds of unhealthy ways...

If the crucifixion of Jesus is about facing all that is wrong and painful in our world and our lives, then the resurrection has to be about a way through and beyond all that so that the wrong and the painful are somehow transformed into new ways of living and being, no? That's what Easter

is about and that's what encountering the risen Christ is all about. How is the pain and the harm somehow transformed into new ways of living, loving and being?

Words like forgiveness can mean something deep for us if guilt, shame and complicity in harm in some way is in our experience... Words like acceptance, healing and reconciliation can mean something deep for us if judgement, condemnation, and a breakdown of relationships are in our experience in some way too... And words like transformation can also mean something for us when positive change happens in our lives in some way, whether such change happens in key moments of life or over a longer period of time...

So then, with this all in our minds and hearts, we can think of encountering Christ in his death and resurrection as something far bigger than simply a historical event that happened to one person and one group of people 2000 years ago. If Jesus represents the God of the universe and if his Spirit as Holy Spirit is diffusive throughout the universe, able to enter any trembling and receptive heart too, then an encounter with the risen Christ is something available to any one of us at any point in time in our living, our struggling, and our desiring to love better.

OK, preacher, fine. We're willing to consider all this, especially as it is Easter and the beginning of Easter season and all. So why not tell us a story to help us make it all a little more real and practical. What can encountering Christ crucified and now risen really mean for us today? Well, ok, I'm glad you asked... Here's an amazing story I came across recently that reflects the truth of Easter Sunday beautifully.

Angela Findlay is an artist, author, podcaster and speaker. Her book: *In my Grandfather's Shadow*, describes how the scars of trauma and wrongdoing can not only be handed down through the generations, but also healed. Angela grew up in the UK with an English father and a German mother, and it is the German side of her ancestry that is the complicated one.

As a child Angela knew that her grandfather had been a general in the German army through the second world war, that he was a phenomenal athlete, and that he had smoked himself to death a week after she was born. But growing up in England in the 1970s and 80s, she also learned how much the Germans were disliked and even hated. She learned about the Holocaust. Even as she, too, came to hate what her own kin represented and what they had done, she also began to feel guilt and shame because this was also who she was in her blood relations. She began to react against her mother and tried any which way to distance herself from anything that associated her with that side of her relations. Unconsciously, though, she felt she herself needed to be punished, that she had no right to be happy, and that she needed to find ways to atone for the sins of her people.

In her growing isolation and feeling of shame, Angela began working in a prison and this is where she felt most at home - among the guilty. It got very dark at times for her, she says.

Good Friday was all consuming with the hope of Easter no where on the horizon. She even says that the darkness in her became so opaque that, many a time, she contemplated taking her own life.

But in her season of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and hitting her 40s, something shifted in Angela. It began when a photo of her grandfather surrendering to the Americans and becoming a prisoner appeared on her computer screen. She and he were in some way both prisoners. This then led her into a lengthy process of uncovering the family's experiences. With the Soviets approaching, Angela's 10-year-old mother had been forced to flee Berlin. Angela began to realize how the trauma of her mother losing her home, being separated from her mother, facing a life of uncertainty as a refugee, plus a childhood shaped by Nazi indoctrination, had all led to difficult behaviours later in life. Angela began to feel compassion for her mother in a whole new way and the power of forgiveness began to rise up in her heart. It meant letting go of expectations of how Angela wanted her mother to be, and understanding and empathizing with her story.

With Angel's grandfather it was a little more complicated. He was a career soldier and a key leader in Hitler's massive invasion of Russia in 1941, culminating in a war of brutality and annihilation previously unknown to the world. His letters reveal he was convinced destroying the Bolsheviks was justified. Angela spent a lot of time researching and travelling to places her grandfather would have been, trying to understand as best she could both him and the times. This all culminated in a trip across Russia with her mother following her grandfather's marching footsteps. At each place, Angela performed a small ritual using earth and tobacco. It became her attempt to heal the wounds of the place, the people and the past. She sought to offer an apology and ask forgiveness for her grandfather, her family and herself for any guilt she carried.

Yet, whether Angela could forgive or ask for forgiveness on behalf of her grandfather and her people remains a question for her to this day. She wanted to forgive her grandfather but it was not her place. She was not his victim the way others were. And even as Germany the nation has erected hundreds of memorials of commemoration, apology and atonement, most first-hand witnesses, victims and survivors of the horrors are now dead. What healing may have been experienced by any of them or from younger generations now, remains an open question everyone must answer for themselves.

For Angela, without a perpetrator to accuse, blame or forgive for the debilitating problems she experienced, she has had to direct her forgiveness more generally. To Germany... to her grandfather and mother for not having been able to deal with their experiences and thereby handing them down to her... and forgiveness to the cold, cruel part of her that hated and punished herself, driving her to do penance and atone for some of the worst crimes in history.

But beyond even this, Angela claims, forgiveness has helped her to see the process of working through her transgenerational transmission of unresolved trauma, guilt and shame as a gift... The process of facing the truth of the past and forgiving wrongs and weaknesses of herself and others has not only lifted the burden for her as a person, but also re-connected her to other people and to life itself. Even as things done and things experienced are in themselves unforgivable, forgiveness has opened a door of transformation for Angela becoming the human she is on an ongoing journey of becoming. It's been an experience of resurrection for her even though Good Friday has been so long an experience difficult to work through and heal. Amazing!

Now, even as I've used Easter language to describe Angela's journey of healing and transformation, this is not Angela's language. And Angela would not describe her journey of forgiveness like Mary and the disciples of Jesus as an encounter with the risen Christ. And yet, is it any different in substance? From death to new life, from letting go of something in order to make space for something new to emerge, to be birthed and to rise up, from facing something painful and difficult and finding new ways to heal, to live and to transmute the negative experiences into new capacities to give, to serve and to love... Easter Sunday and the Easter season each and every year is a call from the risen Christ to come, to follow him and renew ourselves, discovering a new spring after a winter of struggle and of discernment... Christ and his Spirit energy are much bigger than a name. And yet for many of us who gather here and invest in this community we call church, an encounter with the risen Christ is what we seek, again and again. It becomes personal for us all over again.

But let me also say this: for some of us, life has been kind and gracious overall... We have been blessed in ways Angela and others have not... And yet any one of us will come to times of struggle... struggle to discern, to face circumstances not of our choosing, and consequences to choices that could have been better were we better guided and minded... There is always a Good Friday to face at some point, and even if it is as we accompany someone else through theirs... And there is always an Easter Sunday we are called to rise up to, whether it's healing we need most immediately, or a new clarity and energy we need to discover in how to love better... However we encounter Christ this Easter season, may we experience his Spirit flowing through us as vividly and deeply as those first witnesses on that first Easter Sunday 2000 years ago... Amen.