

Easter Day

If there was any doubt about the space between what we know in our hearts and what we understand, it is over today. After our Lenten fasts and having been through the craziness of Holy Week, not to mention the craziness all of us have endured through the last year, we could not be more ready for the heart-stopping story we have just heard, about a woman recognizing her teacher in a time and place where it could not happen, where everything we know about the world is no longer as it should be, where all the rules about how we greet the world have been broken like hinges off a tomb. It is when we choose to live in what cannot be and somehow must be, when what cannot possibly happen becomes the compass of our lives, then we understand the meaning of this day. It is something that could not be true and yet had to be true, a hole smashed in the wall between what we see and touch and taste and smell, and the deeper thing that lies on the other side, something so wonderful that we hardly dare believe it to be true.

If you are like me, Easter is about perspective transformed. When we are peering into the empty tomb, looking with Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved at the wrappings in the corner of the tomb, we are also looking through a hole smashed between the world we live in and the eternal. That world has not been especially kind this year to us. We have been watching the health barometers where we live, which is exhausting in itself; we have adopted safety measures that keep us appropriately distanced, we have lived in worlds as hermetically sealed as any tomb. But today none of that matters today. We are sitting appropriately spaced, masks firmly in place, but we are together at a scene so intimate, so fraught with emotion, that it violates any abundance of caution we could muster. A young woman discovers her teacher who she mistakes for the gardener and the one-word exchange between them—"Mary," he cries, "Rabbouni," she answers—is not about making sure the identities are right. It's about the impossible happening before us, the intimate and the eternal meeting in one blessed moment. That is why we know that Easter is not only about what has happened in God's plan for the world, about the fulfillment of what has happened in the vastness of God's plan for salvation. It is about God's intimacy with each of us, about release from the captivity to fear that has dogged us over the last year. It is about an honest-to-God with us, each of us, so that we do not have to be alone in this fear or any other.

It is also why he is telling Mary not to hang onto him. As I often do, I have visited the art museum across the river recently, which I have come to regard as a gift in the way that we take few things for granted in our lives anymore. There is a painting of this very scene by Botticelli, who was so obsessed with perspective that you could use his lines as a level. In an Italian courtyard, where Jesus has a hoe whimsically flung over his shoulder, Mary Magdalene is sprawled toward her retreating Lord, as he walks toward a doorway, with the mountains of Galilee visible in the background. The name of the painting is, "Noli Me Tangere," which means, "Don't hang onto me." Jesus gives a backward glance to Mary but his place is in the world, to meet his disciples to meet his disciples in the mountains beyond, to greet all of us and to begin throwing light on all the darkness around him, on the fear of the world which doesn't seem like such a benign place these days, to a world remade, where we have the joy and responsibility to make fair and equitable for our children. I have a print of this painting in my office to remind me of the mission Jesus is giving us.

Don't hang onto me also means loosening our grip on the spots we want to place Jesus. The connection with Mary is so moving because it is about intimacy woven with the trust that Jesus belongs out in the world. What we cannot hold onto is our old ways of thinking about the work of Jesus, where we will find

him and how we will recognize him. Jesus the living God knows how we crave certainty, how the idols we create for ourselves to keep us away from our own tombs can imprison us. Jesus leads us outside of all the places we would keep him. After all, if he can be in a courtyard in Florence with a view of Galilee, he could be anywhere, on the streets of Camden, at the transportation center or St. Joseph's House, with the children playing at the end of our block. Along with the wrappings that are discarded at the bottom of the tomb, let us also get rid of the idea that we could have a privatized Lord; the moment we let go of this notion is the day we step away from our own tombs.

It is that idea and responsibility we confer this morning on Jayden Lee, who will become the newest Christian among us. When we commit ourselves to seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself, we do it in the knowledge that that Christ could be anywhere and that our lives should be given to finding those places. When we affirm that we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, we are giving notice to the world that our love is something that will always overflow any boundaries we would use to contain it. And when we strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being, it is not for those whose motives we could easily misunderstand, but for the faith God has placed in all of us. If we need something to hold onto in uncertain times, let it be the plumb line of these promises we make before God and each other.

None of this will be easy. In fact, it will only be possible in a transformed world, where our priorities are focused on the needs of each other and our neighbors in a clearly broken world. But today, let us celebrate the joy of a risen Lord, of a remade creation, of renewed relationships with God and each other. We are not the same people we were even a few days ago; in fact, everything has changed. Let this change begin working on us today, right now. It is not only for the sake of our neighbors or even our own souls. It is for a new world that we want to witness and, for God's sake, let this opportunity be a gift of which we should never let go.