

Easter Persistence

I Peter 1:3-7; Mark 16:1-12

Easter Sunday, (March 31) 2024

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Theologian Tom Long tells this story from the 1982 book, *Intensive Care*, by Mary Lou Weisman, the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of his death. Peter's body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, "sounded so far away, so lost." But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

"Daddy, what does 'impudent' mean?"

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

"Daddy, what does 'impudent' mean?"

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. "Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold."

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death (cited in Tom Long’s sermon “A Living Hope”).

Here is a picture of Christian hope. Christian hope is a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of death. Christian hope is not something sweet and mild. It’s not wishful thinking. It’s not optimism. And it is not a sign of spring with the flowers blooming, the sap rising, and Nature emerging from her long winter’s sleep. Christian hope, Easter hope is impudent. Defiant. Bold. And though often battered and threatened with being overwhelmed, Christian hope is unrelenting. It is persistent.

Which describes exactly the women at the tomb on Easter morning. Mark originally ended his Gospel with, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for trauma and ecstasy had overwhelmed them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk. 16:8).

Now, remember, these were the very same women who had been at the cross. They persisted and watched while the men disciples ran off, hid, denied Jesus, and stayed away. Helpless and powerless, threatened with arrest and perhaps their own torture and death, they stayed at the cross.

When Jesus was buried, there was nothing else they could do but they were there. He was buried on the Sabbath day, and they had no opportunity to anoint the body with spices, but they had been there. And early on that Sunday morning, there was nothing they could do but use what they knew to preserve the body against

time and the elements. And so, they showed up. They were there. They were not intimidated. Though exhausted and overwhelmed, they were there.

You hear this from me a lot, but I repeat it because it is so important, while it is also a challenge for us modern day Christians. Persistently showing up is central to the Christian faith and to hope. It is central to marriage and family. Showing up is not glitzy nor spectacular. It might not be inspirational. We don't get misty eyed over showing up, but showing up is the essence of discipleship. We are to show up in prayer. God consistently, persistently shows up for us and we are to show up for God and we are to show up for others. (Remember, others might need us.) And we are to show up for ourselves. Showing up becomes a habit and just when we least expect it, God surprises us for showing up, too.

These women showed up. Even though when they came to the garden, they remembered that on top of everything else, they couldn't roll away the stone. Those women were tired, frazzled, no sleep, crying from grief, exhausted from stress, never knowing if they might be arrested and tortured as followers of this revolutionary rabbi. And then facing a tomb with a too-big stone for them to move, they almost gave up and turned around and went home. But they impudently showed up. They persisted.

Mark says, "When they looked up, they saw the stone had been rolled away" (16:4). When they looked up. Walking with our heads down exhausted and in despair, we miss out on what God is doing. But when we look up – look up to God, look up and around, pay attention to the work and presence of God, we notice grace and hope that we would have otherwise missed. We get out of ourselves when we look up. We look up and see the stone has been rolled away.

Mark says they went inside the tomb and discovered two things: a young man sitting inside, and that Jesus was gone. The young man, the later Gospel writers say it was an angel, says, “Don’t be afraid. You’re looking for Jesus who had been crucified. He’s not here. He has been raised... Go tell the rest of the disciples and he will meet everyone in Galilee” (v. 5-7).

So, the women run “saying nothing to anyone.”

Then we pick up the story in v. 9, where Mary Magdalene did what the young man/angel told her to do. She persisted. And she went to tell the other disciples. Those others, Mark says, were also mourning. They were in shock, too. And Mark says that when Mary Magdalene told them that Jesus was alive, “they would not believe it” (v. 11).

Luke says that when they heard the women, the male disciples dismissed them, saying that the women’s “words were as idle tales.”

Back in the late 1970’s my college roommate, Brad Creed, who is now the distinguished president of Campbell University in North Carolina, and I were scanning the stacks of the Baylor University library. Hidden away back in a musty corner, we discovered an old theological book published in 1941 but whose views went back much further. Written by old-timey Fundamentalist John R. Rice, it was entitled *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers*. Well, as you might guess, Rice did not approve of anything he listed in his title. From our young perspective this old Fundamentalist, and his arguments, were a joke. Unfortunately, his old arguments keep getting recycled. And furthermore, they go back a longways. The women in the Gospel stories run into the same attitudes and perspectives from the Religious Leaders of their day.

I doubt they had bobbed hair, and we know little about who was married or not, but these women in Mark were becoming preachers! And we need to give thanks to God that they were.

Without the persistent testimony of all these women, it is likely that we would not have news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ today. We might have a Jesus of Nazareth Memorial Society who sit around and tell stories of Jesus and do research and deliver papers on what he said, and who conclude with something like, “Old Jesus was a great man who taught great things. Too bad he got killed.”

But we would not have the church of the Living Christ. The church is the community, the body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ, who seeks to embody Jesus in the world today. Without the testimony of these women, we would likely not know about the New Creation of God in Jesus Christ, the New Creation of justice and peace, healing and hope, grace and love breaking into this old world of violence and bigotry, hatred, and meanness. We likely would not know anything about it.

And it all depended on these persistent women and their testimony.

Some months ago, Jane called my attention to a novel she was reading called, *The First Ladies* by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray which is about the friendship of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune, President of what is now Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, FL, and at the time of the 20's and 30's one of the very rare women presidents of a college, much less a black woman and a black school.

Back in the early 1920's, the Ku Klux Klan was very active in Daytona Beach, due to Mary McLeod Bethune's leadership and work, black voters were

almost outnumbering white voters. Word came that the Klan was going to march through the campus and were going to burn down some of the buildings.

Bethune took charge: "Get the students into the dormitory," she told the teachers, "get them into bed, do not share what is happening right now." The students safely tucked in. Bethune told her faculty that they did not have to stay but had the freedom to leave. One faculty member said, "We are with you, Mrs. Bethune. We've been sitting down for so long. It's time to stand up to these bigots." So, Bethune went and stood in the center of the quadrangle and held her head high as the Klan entered the campus. The other faculty, all women, stood in front of the dormitory.

"As long as the students were safe, I didn't care about the property. Anything that Satan tore down, God would restore," Bethune said.

The Klan marched in their hoods and robes, with their torches held high, and with a big banner that said, "White Supremacy." But then voices began to sing out of the dormitory with the faculty joining in, "Be not dismayed whate'er betide, God will take care of you ... God will take care of you, through every day, o'er all the way ..." Mrs. Bethune and the faculty and the students sang, and the Klan ending leaving the campus as promptly as they arrived, never harming anyone or anything (pp. 85-88).

Mary McLeod Bethune and her faculty and students sang loudly, in the face of fear and intimidation. They sang impudently in the face of bigotry and racism. They sang persistently in the face of the powers of Death.

They sang because of hope. The hope that the living and resurrected Christ was standing with them.

And so do we.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.