

Early in the morning, just as dawn begins brightening the sky over Jerusalem, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, three loyal Galilean women disciples of Jesus, are on the road that leads out of the city. They are carrying spices and sponges and a clean linen shroud, all the things necessary to perform the proper burial rituals there had not been time to do on that awful Friday afternoon. They are making their way beyond the city walls, to the rock-hewn tomb where their teacher and leader, Jesus of Nazareth, had been laid three days before, when suddenly they realize they are going to encounter what we might call a “technical difficulty.” Who will roll away the stone that seals the tomb’s entry way? It’s a big stone! And suddenly, it seems they have a big problem! They stop for a moment to discuss the situation, then continue on anyway. We’ll figure it out when we get there, they decide.

What happens next, however, is beyond them. Making their way through the garden where the new tomb is located, they find that the stone is already moved aside and the tomb stands open. But that is just the beginning . . .

As the women move past the now solved difficulty of the stone . . . as they cross the threshold and enter into the dark coolness of the tomb . . . they move into an experience that even their close companionship with Jesus has not prepared them for.

He’s not there! The tomb is empty! But not really empty, for someone else is seated there! They are shocked! After all, this is a situation they were not at all prepared for!

This is just not natural . . . and the stranger’s words are certainly not normal, or comforting, or even reasonable. This startling “young man,” as the Gospel author, Mark, understatedly calls this heavenly messenger, has the audacity to say: “Don’t be afraid.”

“Do not be afraid.” But what other response could possibly make sense? No, with their mixed reaction of terror and amazement, it is the women who bring the only sense of normalcy to the situation. The women are understandably terrified! . . . And who wouldn’t be?

All the normal and expected boundaries have been crossed. Things are not exactly following standard operating procedures for planet Earth. Jesus is not here! Christ is risen! The tomb is empty! He is not dead! But resurrection is not natural. Or normal. Not usual. Nor expected. Or even understandable on a rational, logical, physical, earth-bound level.

Even twenty centuries later, resurrection is a real stumbling block for many people. So much so that we've hedged the celebration of Easter around with a secure wall of bunnies and chicks, eggs and baskets and jellybeans. Indeed, if we just don't listen too closely to the words on Easter Sunday we can manage to skate right past that old, unnatural offender and bugaboo: the Resurrection. For most folks a kind-of-cruise-control Easter experience is just fine. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride - not too deep, not too meaningful - but definitely predictable. But, all too often, predictable becomes immovable. We don't dig too deeply, therefore, we don't know how to find the real meaning or the purpose of that Divine Mystery that is Christ's Resurrection. Instead, we settle for bunnies and eggs and white lilies, and try to explain it away with talk of crocuses emerging from bulbs, and butterflies from cocoons, and calling it "new life."

Martin Smith, Prior of the Society of St. John, an Episcopal monastic order, has stated that the crisis of our age differs from that in biblical times. In the New Testament era, the crisis was around death and the shortness of life; in our own time, the crisis is around meaninglessness. We have littered our public consciousness with one-dimensional images and symbols, obscuring or burying those things which speak to our depths and challenge us to higher ground. The meaninglessness is soul stealing and creates its own inertia, its own self-referencing, so that meaning-full-ness seems itself laughable and ultimately even more deeply meaningless. When it comes to religion, being more cynical and suspicious and derisive than thou is very hip in our popular culture. We don't dare venture towards real meaning for fear that we will appear the fool.

In our acceptance and embrace of meaninglessness we continue to raise the temperature and kill other species on the planet, we enslave and oppress and abuse our sisters and brothers, and create injustice upon injustice to feed the instruments of our bland existence, the addictions, and consumer goods, and the chaos of our society. We despoil the very ground that feeds us, we murder the futures of our children. The culture of meaninglessness may be commonplace, but it is neither innocent nor

harmless. It is deadly. And all too prevalent – even expected as inescapable - for much of the world.

But as most of us can attest from personal experience, life can change radically and drastically in the blink of an eye. And here is where our own modern reality and experience comes to a point of meeting with those three women at the empty tomb. They thought they knew what they were headed for, they anticipated regular sorts of obstacles to deal with, to keep them busy in the face of their overwhelming sense of loss and meaninglessness. But a rolled-away boulder and a strange encounter with a mysterious young man would turn all their expectations upside down.

Mystery - entering into the unknown and unpredictable - is the sacred ground upon which we meet God - and the Resurrection is definitely a mystery – a Divine Mystery. Divine Mystery is not mystification or an attempt to confuse or obscure. Not religious mumbo-jumbo trying to hide the man behind the curtain. Not an escape from the proof and demands of hard science. Divine Mystery is a different order of knowing, and trying to apply the scientific method or the demands of empirical knowledge to mystery is to head in the wrong direction. It has its own logic, an order of being and knowing that supersedes the limitations of empiricism. It is not surrounded, bordered, or limited, or defined by facts, but by God. In the Divine Mystery, we begin to know and to be known. We find ourselves, our life, hidden as it were, and then revealed, with the Risen Christ in God. Divine Mystery requires that we let go of what we think we know in order to discover what is meaningful, acknowledge from whom does meaning come, and how is meaning translated into power to live justly and compassionately. The Mystery that is God and made known through the Risen Christ ultimately clarifies and illuminates – if we will allow it.

Entering into the mysteries of God - God's love expressed in the wonders of creation, liberation, incarnation, resurrection and ascension - is to definitely go beyond the self-imposed limitations created by our demand for empirical "fact" and scientific "proof"

Mark ends his Gospel reading by saying that the women fled in terror and amazement and fear, and told no one.

Well, clearly, they eventually spoke. Clearly, they eventually told their story to someone. So, we now have two thousand years of people reflecting on these three faithful women's story; and two thousand years of more faithful

disciples telling their own stories of how God radically entered and changed their lives. Whether on the beach at the sea of Galilee, on the road to Emmaus or Damascus, New York to California, in an office, or school, a hospital room, or over the backyard fence - anywhere, at anytime - we can meet the Risen Christ. The Resurrection affirms this: that even if we cannot meet the embodied, flesh-and-blood Jesus, bound in time and place to first century Palestine, we can meet the inspirited Christ anytime, anywhere, here, today, in our embodied, historical lives.

The tomb was not the end, but the portal of the Resurrection. The women didn't have to move the stone and neither do you. You simply have to walk forward, cross the threshold and enter into the Divine Mystery, and God will meet you there. As Christians, the death-trance of meaninglessness is not our defining experience, the Risen Christ is. As the writer of Ephesians said, "Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you!" And that, my friends, is the ultimate significance of the Resurrection! The ultimate purpose of Easter!

It is the true and lasting meaning behind our bold proclamation of the Gospel truth:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.