

**THE END OF DEATH'S SOVEREIGNTY; MATTHEW 28:1-11; EASTER, 4.12.2020;
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When our four-year old granddaughter Eliza last visited us she had just dressed for Halloween as the princess in the Disney movie "Beauty and the Beast". You remember the story, a spell is cast on a selfish prince who is told unless he learns how to love and earns the love of another before the last petal of a rose falls, he will remain a beast. A beautiful village girl, the princess, becomes the one he loves and whose love he earns.

Eliza brought her princess dress to Buffalo and reenacted her favorite song from the movie every day after recruiting me to be the beast; together we walked down our front hall steps which she referred to as the "Palace Steps," holding my hand and her mother's iPhone in the other hand playing her favorite song. Down the steps we'd stroll, beauty and the beast.

Mr. Rogers used to say when children play they are really working, putting on the roles they see others play, trying them out for themselves; it is the formation of character taking place before our eyes.

Today's story from Matthew is the aftermath of the resurrection; first two women, then the disciples and later many, many more take on the role of Jesus and do the things he did and said and taught. *It is the Easter phenomenon, followers choosing to become like him.*

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb Jesus has already been raised; an angel tells them *not to be afraid* and rolls back the stone so they can enter the tomb and see that it is empty, then instructs them to tell the others and go to Galilee where the risen Christ will meet them. On the way, he appears and when they bow down to worship him *he tells them, "Do not be afraid."*

All four gospels have some version of this event but share only a few of the details; attempts to harmonize or explain the mystery of it fall flat; no one was there to witness what actually happened. All we really know about the resurrection is *what happened to the people because of it.*

We've been watching some classic Jack Nicholson movies during our self-isolation. One that stands out is Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" – a 1962 Broadway play made into a movie in 1975 which was Nicholson's breakout role.

None of the reviews refer to Nicholson's character as a Christ figure and his band of insane asylum patients as the disciples but the parallels are there. R.P.

McMurphy is a ne'er do who breaks society's rules lands himself in a mental institution. Once there, it doesn't take long for him to disrupt the hospital's locked-down way of life. The asylum is an apt symbol for the pre-60s society that Kesey's drama rebels against. McMurphy's big-hearted, call-a-spade-a-spade personality begins to rub off on the cowering, bullied-by-the-system patients.

Finally, McMurphy pushes ward supervisor Nurse Ratched too far and he is lobotomized. One of the patients, a giant Indian who never speaks and is thought to be deaf and dumb, suffocates McMurphy to put him out of his misery. The chief who ironically always thought himself too small to be or succeed at anything then enters the shower room and rips a huge institutional sink from the floor which he uses to smash through a window with bars; as he escapes *back into the natural world* – a sylvan meadow at dawn – the fog lifts and the faces of the other patients, awakened by the crash, light up with expressions of thrill and delight and shouts of joy.

It is without question a full-blown resurrection scene – totally unexpected; especially after McMurphy dies and a pall hangs over the ward. That the least likely character who hasn't spoken a word and is, until this moment, a mere and mute observer of life, that he should follow McMurphy's example and break the grip of fear the institution holds over him and, in effect, keeps him prisoner, or better a dead man entombed, is not just one of the finest endings in American cinema, it is the story of Easter; the proclamation that life is stronger than death.

The final frame is the transformed faces of the other patients, from lost and vacant, who after the Chief's breakout awaken to a new day, and look for the first time, after McMurphy is gone, like they are alive. They too long to break free, they too begin to believe themselves capable of experiencing this new power.

What has changed is their refusal to continue to grant death sovereignty. Death rules when fear and intimidation take over our lives and direct our decisions. It is the exchange of our humanity for conformity; the silencing of our voices and opinions for allegiance to the authorities. Death is sovereign where freedom of expression is taken away by fear of being punished with social stigma and condemnation. How fitting that the first words of the angel and of Jesus to the women are, "Do not be afraid."

When death is sovereign religion is made into rules; the state punishes challengers to its authority; greed creates an economy that serves the few at the expense of the many.

This is what Jesus and every great leader of every generation overturn: Luther and Calvin the corruption of the church; our founding fathers and mothers the hegemony of the English crown; Martin Luther King, Jr. and his generation the economy of slavery and the scourge of racism.

Yet, when Jesus says that he will meet his followers in Galilee resurrection becomes personal and strikes at the bedrock of our fear. For it is in Galilee where the disciples who left their homes to follow him are failures; on the one hand, because their leader turned out to be an executed criminal of the state, and on the other hand, because when they encounter the risen Christ their guilt for deserting him makes them seem and feel like frauds.

Rather than parade his victory through the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus heads to the place where it all began, to meet not his "didn't-quite-make-it" disciples but his "brothers" as he now calls them. He gives them the only thing that could resurrect their spirits: forgiveness; not after their apologies but as his first order of business as the risen Christ.

And not in a blaze of glory, like the end of time with "the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen." But more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, then in that place; here in this heart, there in that relationship.

In this way, the good news of resurrection starts to spread – that no matter how lost and low we may be life, not death, is the final answer. That is how the Gospels describe it, not as convincingly as they can, but as *truthfully* as they can. It was the most extraordinary thing they believed that ever happened, and yet they tell it, one writer says, so quietly you have to lean close to be sure what they are telling. They tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious, and holy, and fragile, and unbelievable, and true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonor it. To proclaim the resurrection the way they do, you would have to say it in whispers. "Christ has risen." Like that.

Or maybe they tell it in whispers because though they want it to be true old fear tells them it may not be; so they share it tentatively at first, seeing but not even recognizing him like Thomas in the upper room, or on the lake shore broiling fish when they return in their boats after a night of fishing, or on the road to Emmaus when a mysterious stranger accompanies them; but then, slowly they realize that it is him, that he is alive and with them, not as a ghost, but in the full power and presence of his personality.

The question today is where are our lives still ruled by fear? Where is it that we permit death to have sovereignty in our marriages or parenting, in our professions, our politics, our physical and mental health?

Fear is insidious, like water it runs to the lowest place but finds where we are most vulnerable and occupies that space like a god. It is manifest in addictions, chronic emotional wounds, in disease and grief. But if we hear this old story anew, like those asylum patients, we are changed forever.

If ever there was an occasion to be fearful it would be in a pandemic – with the spread of a deadly virus. But there are hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of first responders, doctors and nurses who refuse to grant death sovereignty over their neighborhoods and towns and cities but show up for work, exposing themselves to the virus every day. Someone said we should fill our sports stadiums with these everyday heroes and all stand to applaud and thank them.

A friend invoked this week the musicians aboard the Titanic who huddled together on that sinking ship to play the hymn “Nearer My God To Thee” to bring comfort to husbands who were putting their wives on life boats, to wives and children waving goodbye to their husbands and fathers; those musicians stood between fear that waited to seize every heart and their shipmates.

We don’t get to choose the circumstances of the times in which we live but we do get to choose how to respond. Abused patients in a mental asylum, health workers in a pandemic, the Titanic musicians all chose to deny death sovereignty. Luther, Calvin, the founders of our democracy, 20thc activists for suffrage, civil rights for blacks, gays, women, and seniors. They are one great chorus of St. Paul’s “O death, where is thy sting?”

We are not just people who know a secret we keep in our hearts that gives us reassurance of eternal destiny for our loved ones. We are called today by an empty tomb and the words “Do not be afraid” to be Christ’s commissioned ambassadors who represent God’s resurrection-reign in a world that still believes death rules.

So go, wake up some dead people in a mental institution; play comforting music for those who are dying and saying goodbye to loved ones; challenge injustice in the church and society; stare down a deadly virus; fight for the rights of the disadvantaged. Imitate me, Jesus said, even the stuff about loving enemies.

Maybe that old fairy tale points to an eternal truth: the choice *really is* between being a beast or something far less than we are capable of or choosing, as St. Paul said, to “put on Christ” and being a beautiful messenger of resurrection. Amen.