

The Gospel of John tells us a joyous but slow story about recognizing that Jesus has been resurrected. Mary Magdalene is the first at the tomb and sees that the stone has been moved, and assumes very naturally that the grave has been robbed. That's what she tells Peter and the other disciple, who race to the tomb. The other disciple sees the linen wrappings, but doesn't go into the tomb. Then Peter gets there and goes into the tomb; he sees the linen wrappings *and* the cloth that had been on Jesus' head. And then the other disciple enters the tomb and sees the same things, but they do not yet understand what it means, and they go back home.

Mary stays at the tomb and weeps. Everyone has some partial information now—the tomb is empty, the wrappings have been discarded—but nobody yet knows what happened. Two angels speak to Mary, but don't give her any information. She sees Jesus, finally, but mistakes him for the gardener. Finally, when Jesus addresses her by her name, she recognizes him and calls him Teacher. Then she is able to go to the other disciples and tell them "I have seen the Lord."

John tells us a *very* gradual process of recognition, which I think means that the resurrection message is difficult. It's life-giving, but it's really difficult! How can this possibly be real? Faith is a challenge. But Christ is in the midst of it, even when he is not recognized.

In my first year of divinity school, our class on pastoral ministry was required to read George Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*. This was like asking ninth grade science students to read graduate level physics. I had no idea what to do with that story; I wanted somebody to teach me how to deal with the board of

trustees or have an appropriate visit with a person with Alzheimer's. Now I can appreciate it a little more. The protagonist is a young priest in France, very introverted and not particularly good with people. He tries conscientiously to fulfill his duties, but the children in catechism class are naughty, and the villagers gossip about him. He knows that he's not doing a very good job, and he tries to figure out how to grow professionally, but it's pretty uphill. He just soldiers on ineptly. The conflict in this story is not a dramatic good versus evil, but a more understated resignation "versus faith: the choice either to take for granted a world of habitual vice, moral compromise, and creeping death, or the choice to open yourself to love."¹

This young priest leads a Lenten existence, all year round. As we have done since the evening we received our ashes, he attends to the shadows and darkness of his reality. He looks squarely at his failures—his lack of charisma, his poor judgment—and at the unpromising set of people whose life in Christ he is supposed to nurture. He is very much like the woman with the alabaster jar in Luke's gospel who anoints Jesus' feet, weeping, to the distaste of the other people at dinner: so cognizant of his inability to execute, to get it done, that he can make no excuse—but he still stays open to love.

Richard Rohr says of the woman with the alabaster jar that Jesus recognizes her as someone who has been forgiven much in order to be able to show such great love. Indeed, Rohr says, when Jesus praises the woman and rebukes his contemptuous dinner companions, he's saying that *the very failures and radical insufficiency of her life are what have led her into larger life and love.*² The very failures of our lives are what lead us into larger life and love. Lotuses cannot grow

on marble; they have to grow in mud. When we look at mud and fail to see the life and love there, we are seeing what's there, but not seeing all that's there. When Mary looks at the empty tomb and thinks the grave has been robbed, she is seeing what's there, but she's not seeing *all* that's there, because Jesus is right there too.

The priest in Bernanos' book never does become a skilled pastor, nor does he win the hearts and minds of his parishioners. What does happen is that he is diagnosed with stomach cancer and, on the way home from the doctor's, stops at a friend's house because he feels too unwell to continue home. He dies that night, so quickly that it's impossible to get another priest there to give him last rites. But his dying words are, "Does it matter? Grace is everywhere." In the great economy of God, everything is usable material—this priest's clumsiness is usable material; the alabaster jar woman's failings are usable material. God does not reject the mud we carry around, but uses it to bring us into unity with God.

Richard Rohr says that we come to divine union not by doing it right but by doing it wrong. It is our mistakes that lead us to God, as Bernanos' priest realizes on his deathbed. For the True Self (Rohr's term for the person united with God), there is nothing to hate, reject, deny, or judge as unworthy or unnecessary. Even the stuff we hate most about ourselves are just pressure points that create something new in the long run, as pressure does to carbon deep beneath the earth, creating diamonds. Just as, in John's gospel, the risen Christ is present in the garden the whole time, while disciples are peering into the tomb, entering the tomb, and weeping outside the tomb, so grace is operating within and among us all the time, whether we know it or not.

The first letter of John says, “My dear people, we are already the children of God. But what we are in the future is not yet fully revealed. All we know is that when it is revealed, we shall all be like God.” On Ash Wednesday, we received ashes to mark our bodies as mortal and perishable, and remembered the words from Genesis 3: “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” That is true, but it is only half of the truth. The rest of the truth is what we receive on Easter morning: Love is always stronger than death, and to that love we inevitably return.

An ancient homily for Holy Saturday, the night before Easter, goes like this:

I order you, O sleeper, to awake!
I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell.
Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.
Rise up, work of my hands, you were created in my image.
Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you.
Together we form only one person, and we cannot be separated! ³

Let us pray: Loving God,

With joy and unending praise we raise our voices to you, as together we sing,

“Hallelujah! Jesus is risen!” Amen.

¹ <http://englewoodreview.org/georges-bernanos-diary-of-a-country-priest-reflection/>

² Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, p. 180

³ Rohr, p. 187