

Always Beyond Our Grasp John 20:1-18

Resurrection of the Lord/ 31st March 2024

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Yes, that's what John wants us to know. There's no doubt about it. However, the truth or facticity of that claim doesn't make all that we celebrate this Sunday, and every Sunday, any easier to grasp or understand because it doesn't. Like the other Gospel writers, John is straining for a way to bear witness to something exceedingly difficult to talk about. An event, namely, *resurrection*, that destabilizes and disorients our sense of reality and forces us to rethink what is possible. That's the truth that John is pointing to. But not to resurrection *per se*, but to the one who said, "I am resurrection and life" (Jn. 11:25). He's a *living* truth. John invites us to share in and live from an encounter with resurrection, that is, an *experience* of a living truth so profound, so alive, we're always grasping for ways to apprehend him.

And as we see, like Mary, Peter, and John, we are all at a loss. They have no idea what's going on or what to do. Confusion is everywhere. The entire story feels unsteady. When Mary arrived at the tomb, she wasn't expecting the stone to be moved and the body removed—and she certainly wasn't expecting resurrection. That was not on her radar. We are thrown, like Mary, into a state of disequilibrium. Everything has come undone. Nothing is sure. The reality they took for granted was shattered and can never be put back together the same way.

John is masterful in the way he tells the story. It's probably best for us to *feel* our way into the story, a story that always seems just beyond our reach. Did you notice, did you feel the play of absence and presence permeating the story? Mary arrives at a tomb she thought contained the body of her Lord, only to discover that it's empty. Mary leaves and tells John and Peter. John arrives first, peers into the tomb, and sees burial linens lying there—more evidence of absence. Then Peter arrives and goes into the tomb and sees the burial wrappings, but also the head cloth rolled up and placed on the side. John follows in and sees the same. The presence of the burial linens suggests the absence of a body, which, at the same time, in our imaginations, suggests a presence. Absence and presence, again.

Peter and John never say a word. Their silence speaks volumes. What does one say? Then they flee—and leave poor Mary all alone. They don't say anything to her either. They don't even try to console her. There's no feeling here. They just leave her in her grief and tears—which is kind of rude and selfish, don't you think?

But their departure allowed Mary to arrive in a place she didn't know she needed to go or was even possible. In their absence, she stayed with her grief and stepped into the uncertainty of it all. And "as she wept," John tells us, she bent over and looked into the tomb. She saw what the others did not see—two angels on the slab where Jesus' body once lain. One angel is sitting at the head, and the other is sitting at the foot—John is always specific and every word is intentional. Two angels are flanking a space, flanking an empty space. Their presence forms a "container" for the uncontainable. If this reminds you of the Ark of the Covenant in the Hebrew scriptures, which, we're told, "contained" the uncontainable presence of Yahweh, the Ark that

moved with God's people, the Ark that eventually found a place in the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem, becoming the throne, the dwelling place of the Living God, the Ark which had a flat gold lid known as the *kapporeth* or mercy-seat flanked by two cherubim creating a space for the non-representable, non-possessable God—if that's what came to mind, then John is smiling, because that's probably John's intent. That's how John wants us to think *theologically* about resurrection.¹ Real, yet non-possessable. Real, yet, non-graspable. Real, yet not easily recognizable or understandable. Presence and absence at the same time. Real, close, yet always just beyond our reach. Here, but not here. Absence. Presence.

Mary's conversation with the angels "guarding" the space of the absent Jesus, in the liminal space caught betwixt and between what is there and not there, belief and disbelief, in the confusing, dizzying space of grief, all this causes her to mistake Jesus with the gardener. She doesn't expect to see him. As poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) knew, there are things in this world that are "Not known, because not looked for."² It's not her fault. Who's ever prepared for an encounter with resurrection? She senses his absence even though he's present. Nothing is clear.

That is until he says her name. The sound of his voice, a voice that carries her name, becomes a bridge that spans the absence filling with his presence. Sound ties us to the invisible, and it draws us to the absent near.³ After this week's events in Baltimore, we know the value of bridges; we know how tenuous and fragile they can be. A bridge is a powerful symbol, which is why the collapse of the Key Bridge has touched us so profoundly. A bridge, like a metaphor, spans a divide; it's a crossroad spanning an absence, a thoroughfare, a point of connection. In the text, sound and language become the bridge. Sound affirms a distance between us and its source. When we hear a sound but cannot see its source we yearn for it nevertheless. In listening, we strain toward the source of the sound, "toward a possible meaning," arriving toward us as if across an invisible bridge.⁴ It's at the sound of her name that Mary turns and sees and knows her Lord. "My sheep," Jesus said, "hear my voice" (Jn. 10:26). The one she loves is not dead but alive. Mary tries to reach out to touch and hold him, but Jesus says, "Do not hold on to me..." (Jn. 20:17). Present, yet just beyond our reach. Present, yet ungraspable. Present, but not held by us.

We are called not possess, but rather to *attend* the Risen One. And, so, we must resist thinking we can "grasp" or fully understand resurrection. We need always to watch whether we're trying to "absorb" Jesus into *our* beliefs about him, including our creeds, or trying to "absorb" him or co-opt him into ideologies and assumptions about the world and how the world works—the church must be vigilant when we see people or groups trying to "use" Jesus for their own selfish ends. The risen Lord is not the possession of the church, and the risen Lord is not the possession of anyone else.

What we can do, though, is take our cue from Mary. She shows us how to *attend* to him in love. Not to possess but to attend in love. Mary shows us the way. It's her heart that leads her to the tomb, a heart overwhelmed with grief. She goes while it's still dark. We're never told why. She can't wait until sunrise. She desires to be near him even though he is dead. Mary searches after the one whom she loves—"my Lord." She doesn't run away, like John and Peter. She stays with her feelings, with her grief and tears. Love leads her to look into the tomb. Love moves her through the story in the demands she makes of the gardener. She's persistent. It's her heart, open,

not closed off, that eventually leads her to the place where she can hear the voice of the one she loves and who loves her.

In the book of Jeremiah, God says to God's people, "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me" (Jeremiah 29:14). Love, not a possessive love—for love does not possess, does not control, does not grasp⁵—a love that attends to the absent-presence and present-absence of the Risen Lord, that leads the way to him, always leads us to the God Christ showed us, is undying love.

¹ Rowan Williams, "Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne," *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 183-196.

² T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* in *The Completed Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 145.

³ On the phenomenology of sound and language as a bridge, see Thomas Harrison, *Of Bridges: A Poetic and Philosophical Account* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 77ff.

⁴ David Burrows, *Sound, Speech and Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 21; and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 8. Cited Harrison, 78.

⁵ Kenneth E. Kovacs, "Non-possessive delight," in Annie L. DeRolf, Christy Gunter, John Loppnov, Lon Marshall, and Thomas Jay Oord, eds., *Love Does Not Control: Therapists, Psychologists, and Counselors Explore Uncontrolling Love* (SacraSage, 2023), 169-172. Practical theologian James E. Loder (1931-2001) said, "Love is the non-possessive delight in the particular of the other."