

Celebrating in the Dissonance John 20:1-18

Our theme for the Lent season this year has been Dwelling in Dissonance. Dissonance defined as “A tension or clash resulting from the combination of two disharmonious... elements.” And I think I would add ‘seemingly’ ...seemingly disharmonious elements. So we’ve been encouraged, in the words of the team from Leader Magazine, to “pause on the threshold between loss and glory....accept ambiguity, lean into longing.” We’ve spent Lent slowly reflecting on the events of Holy Week and focusing on the dissonance and the tension that we see and feel in the passages, trying to not move too quickly toward resolution but allowing ourselves to experience and sit in the discomfort and tension present in some of these stories and events.

Now that Easter is upon us, perhaps we could expect to move past the dissonance and into the resolution of the story. And in some ways we do. With the gift of hindsight and the ability to reflect on these events centuries later, we are able to see what Jesus was trying to forewarn the disciples about. We are able to see that ‘of course crucifixion was not the end of the story!’ Still, when we try to look at our passage today through the eyes of the disciples, we see all is not resolved for them at this time. And that is what I want to do this morning. I want us to try to understand what was happening for Mary Magdalene and the other disciples in these moments and connect this to our lives and our journeys of faith.

These disciples chose to follow after Jesus, not knowing exactly what that decision would mean for them. And their journeys were full of twists and turns, moments of enlightenment and understanding, moments of questions and doubts, moments of celebration and now moments of grief. And so it with us as well. So I empathize with the characters in our passage today as they struggle to understand the significance of what has all taken place now that Jesus has died...but his tomb is empty, wanting to understand but just not quite comprehending it all in that moment. And my hope is that by reflecting on this story from their perspective we can be encouraged that we’re able to continue walking with Jesus even in the midst of confusion, questions, and felt dissonance. And that we can celebrate the hope that Easter brings even if the dissonance we feel is not totally resolved.

John 20:1-18

So our passage begins with Mary Magdalene waking up early and making her way to the tomb where Jesus’ body was laid. I imagine her still deep in grief, maybe weeping as she walks. She gets closer and she sees that the large stone blocking the

entrance was removed. So she runs to Peter and ‘the other disciple’ (most likely John) and tells them Jesus’ body has been taken. Resurrection doesn’t seem to be on her mind here, she assumes the body has simply been taken by someone. So Peter and John run to the tomb. Peter enters and sees it empty, sees the burial cloths. And then we read “the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn’t yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.”

We’re told John saw and believed but also told they didn’t yet understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. It is curious wording. And then the disciples go back to where they were staying. I wonder, what would that walk have been like? What was going through their minds? I imagine their minds racing with questions: Why was the tomb empty? Was his body taken? Why were the burial cloths still there? What does this all mean? What do we do?

The writers for Leader Magazine state about this passage: “We sense the urgency, the need to know what has happened, the need to feel with honesty, the need to name our losses and confront those who might be agents of our loss. But we also sense the time it can take for our understanding to catch up with our circumstances.” (p. 55).

Mary Magdalene, John, Peter, their understanding has not caught up to their circumstances yet. They know what they saw and what they didn’t see, but aren’t quite able to make sense of it all yet. And so they are living in this in-between space, this liminal space. Not fully understanding but still seeking, still devoted to following in the way of Jesus.

Our attention is then turned back to Mary. Peter and John had returned to the group but Mary, in her confusion and grief, had stayed by the tomb, weeping. She looks again into the tomb and this time sees 2 angels who ask her “why are you crying?” Resurrection still does not seem to be on her mind as she answers, “They have taken my Lord away...and I don’t know where they have put him.” She’s deep in grief and now confused, lost.

And we’re told “she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.” This person who we are told is Jesus but Mary doesn’t know this at that moment, also asks her why she is crying. Mary thinks this person is a gardener so she asks them if they know where the body is. And this person says, “Mary.” And Mary somehow now realizes this is Jesus. Jesus speaks her name, and she recognizes.

And Jesus speaks to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Jesus commissions Mary, sends her to tell the disciples the miraculous news and so Mary does.

Again I wonder, what would that walk or run have been like? What would have been going through her mind? She has had a whirlwind few days. Grieving intensely after the death of Jesus, engaging in mourning rituals only to find the body gone. Weeping and distraught and then turning to see the resurrected Jesus who then commissions her as “the first Easter apostle” (Willard Swartley, p. 457).

Now, if we were to continue reading in the Gospel of John we would see the resurrected Jesus appearing to the other disciples as he did with Mary and we would see their understanding begin to increase like we see with Mary.

But I don’t want us to move too quickly to that. I want us to pay attention to this in-between time. At this point, there is much these followers know. They know Jesus was from God. They know and believed he was the Messiah. They know he had given them hope...They also know that he died, they know he was buried in a tomb and now they know his body is gone. What they don’t know is what exactly happened to the body and what this all means. The text doesn’t tell us exactly what they were thinking but I imagine, if it was me, experiencing some dissonance. I imagine I would be a strange mix of faith and doubt and questions and fear. Still wanting to follow in the way of Jesus but now confused, wondering.

I understand Easter to be a time of celebration, one of the most celebratory days in the Christian calendar. And indeed it is. But for these disciples I imagine it to be more of a confusing time, trying to understand what exactly happened and what it all means for them. And I find myself empathizing. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is an extra-ordinary event. Even with the gift of hindsight, the gift of Scripture giving us perspective and commentary, it can be a confusing, hard-to-understand event. Christians throughout history have known Jesus’ actions here to be central to our faith but have also wrestled with it and attempted to understand and explain in multiple ways what exactly happened for us when Jesus did this. And the more I think about it this year, the more I empathize with these disciples. Knowing something significant has happened...but struggling to make sense of it all. Wanting answers, wanting resolution, wanting understanding...but knowing that isn’t quite where they are at and being unable to force it along. Can you relate to this?

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin speaks to this in his prayer/poem ‘Patient Trust’ when he says,

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.
And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time...
will make of you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

Accept the anxiety of being in suspense, incomplete. Accept the anxiety of being in dissonance, we could say. I think that what we see here with Mary, Peter, and John, is an elevated or more intense space of what the journey of faith is like for each us. It is a choosing to continue walking the journey even when our understanding has not yet caught up to our circumstances. Knowing that something eternally significant has taken place in Jesus, but maybe not fully comprehending the meaning of it all the time. Knowing there is and always will be an element of mystery to this faith and choosing to keep seeking and keep journeying with the mystery. Accepting the anxiety of the questions, the wondering, the not-yet-knowing, the dissonance, but continuing to seek in the midst of it all and continuing to wait for those moments, even if they sometimes feel few and far between, when the resurrected Christ speaks our name...and we encounter Them, as Mary did.

And this isn't always easy, but I think our passage also holds wisdom for us for how we can continue walking the journey whether we are in moments of celebration or despair, enlightenment or doubt, dissonance or resolution. A couple things I see...

We see in this passage, especially in Mary Magdalene, an embrace of their humanity. A not trying to be somewhere on the journey they are not. A not pretending to be someone they are not. But rather embracing the whole of their human experience. Mary is lost in grief. She had placed all her hope in this Jesus as the Christ...and now he was dead. She is weeping, mourning. She had lost her center. And she let herself feel those things. She didn't deny them. She didn't try to put on a smile and just 'have more faith.'

One of my favorite passages of scripture is Psalm 103. Within the Psalm it says, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust..." (vv. 13-17).

I remember a conversation with a friend years ago about these verses, about how they can be read in a depressing light with emphasis on our frailty and humanity. But I've long found great comfort when it speaks of humanity as dust because it says God knows we are dust, God knows we are human, we are limited. We don't need to deny our humanity, our limitations, our struggles, our questions. It is all known to God. Wherever you are on this journey of faith, this journey of life, God knows and is right there. Mary seems to have embraced her humanity, and we can find encouragement to do the same.

And secondly, I see the importance of journeying together. Note that in our passage Jesus' followers are gathered together. This was not a journey they travelled in isolation. Given the difficulty of this journey of faith in our world at times, having fellow sojourners alongside of you becomes significant and life-giving. I think this is why community has long been such an important value for Anabaptists. We need people to come alongside of us wherever we are in our journey.

And so as we celebrate this Easter,...as we remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, my hope is that wherever you find yourself on this journey of faith, whether you are like Mary Magdalene early in the passage, deeply grieving, maybe even losing hope. Or like Mary later in the passage, confident in the presence of the resurrected Jesus and full of renewed hope. Whether you are like John, believing but not quite understanding or like Peter, oscillating between times of faith and doubt, enlightenment and confusion. Wherever you find yourself this Easter morning, may you be able to embrace your humanity and your journey with grace and patience. May you experience the support of fellow sojourners in the faith. May you know that you don't need to resolve all the dissonance you may feel in order to celebrate the hope that Easter brings. And may you know the

faithful and eternal presence of the Resurrected Christ and the love of God in Christ Jesus from which nothing can separate us (Romans 8:38-39).