

“I don’t know.” (Easter – 1Apr18)
John 20:1-18

It’s kind of a strange story, so let’s see if we can figure this out:

I heard this morning there was a rabbit roaming around...with eggs. To carry a basket full of eggs, I presume it was some sort of gargantuan bigfoot bunny, which must walk upright, since it couldn’t go hippity-hoppity without spilling eggs. My understanding is that this rabbit was distributing the eggs in surprising locations. Now, I don’t think anybody claims the irregular rabbit laid the eggs, but I’m still not clear if the rabbit stole from our MCC coop, or contracted with magical chickens for specialty eggs in a rainbow of colors, or what. They *must* be unusual eggs, to come in stripy assortments of vibrant gem tones and pleasant pastels. And with unusual fillings, I think, too, not just plain ol’ yokes.

What do we say about that? Can we figure out how that all came together? Can we know what’s going on here?

There’s an explanation involving connections to the earth and natural cycles, that bunnies and eggs are about spring and fertility and reproduction and abundance and how life persists in nature around us, and therefore can also be celebrated by us.

Sure, I’m in favor of those things. It’s not wrong as an explanation. But it still misses the mark. It explains away the strangeness. I mean, this is a bunny in a bow tie benevolently bouncing along with wicker-ware brimming with brightly shellacked chocolate avian hatchables! That’s not normal!

Take that as my peculiar preface into cautioning against explaining away or writing off this strange Easter saga. We shouldn’t construe that Jesus rising from the dead means the indomitable spirit of life! that love conquers all!! that we shall overcome some day!!! that there are always fresh beginnings!!!! that those who die heroically standing up for what they believe in will never really perish from our memories!!!!

Blah blah blah.

Again, there’s none of that that’s not true. And it may even find truth embodied in this story. But embodiment takes a body. It’s not just a metaphor. No arbitrary archetype. Jesus isn’t just a symbol of humanity or a sign of love. Certainly there’s no hint in this Bible reading that it’s so easily and hollowly explained as the triumph of life or the revolutionary spirit any more than this is a story of Jesus popping out of his hole in the ground, rubbing his beady little eyes, glancing around, and declaring in his groundhoggiest grumble that the six more weeks of winter should be up and it’s time for spring. This day isn’t just a seasonal festival, that green things are alive and will return and grow after being dormant and dark through the winter, even though we’re mostly suckered into treating this as a benign holiday, showing up in nice bright cheery clothes to declare the doldrums of Lent behind us, gorge on jelly beans and ham, and look forward to summer.

That doesn’t allow the strangeness to stand. No, through and through this story is dealing with a specific particular, singular conundrum. So to give it credit, we should pay attention.

This account of Jesus’ death and resurrection is shocking and strange. If it were simply about a spirit of justice fighting against oppression, the story could’ve easily run that after Jesus was killed, his followers refused to back down and stormed the gates shouting “remember the Alamo!” and overthrew the authorities and set things right. Or at least that they went down in a blaze of glory. We know such stories. There are even examples from history around the time of Jesus.

But that’s not this strange story. Instead we’ve got Sunday morning and an empty tomb. Maybe to stick us with the strangeness and warn against claiming we’ve got it figured out, the first interpretation comes from Mary Magdalene saying, “We don’t know.” The body is gone and we don’t know where it got put. Right away, there’s something that we don’t understand, the re-entrenched mystery, the lack of clarity and resolution.

That “we don’t know where they’ve laid him” could lead to various speculations. We might transpose this to a Halloween setting and picture Dr. Frankenstein and Eye-gore scavenging as grave robbers. Or maybe like Mary oddly does, we guess a gardener was doing spring cleaning and tidying up by moving corpses around the cemetery?

Whatever it is, notice they’re on the lookout for a body. There’s no sense in here that Jesus is gone because his true self is now up in heaven, that his soul has floated away, that only his earthly remains...remain. No, that rather precisely misses the point. This isn’t our popular notion of death and loss and relocation. This is about a dead body, and eventually encountering a body back to life. Jesus was God in the flesh for us, and this still is in the flesh. The spiritual cannot be separated from that. It can’t get dug up from earth and dislodged from what we know. God is here and in this way. The gospel is insistent on that.

So, hearing the ridiculous report from Mary of this missing body, Peter and the other disciple go sprinting off to the graveyard, evidently needing to get there in a hurry because the dead guy is making a quick getaway and they need to catch up? I don’t know. They observe that—indeed—he’s gone, though the graveclothes are still there.

Then, in an odd verse without much clarification, it says that they “saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead.” And then they went home. I’m not sure what they were believing, if they didn’t understand what was happening to Jesus. Maybe they just finally believed what Mary told them, though her honesty is a miniscule detail to bother believing. Not much of godly faith there. The going home is also such a strange resolution. They didn’t put on their detective caps and exclaim, “We’ll get to the bottom of this.” They sort of seemed to shrug and go about life.

I worry about that for us: believing without understanding, we may sing Alleluias and then disregard the whole thing, shrug, finish spring break, and get on with what we were doing before.

Not Mary. She keeps trying to understand. And she keeps failing. She’s already begun her confession of faith, her creedal statement by saying that she doesn’t know. And twice more she repeats that, once to the angels, and once to incognito Jesus. Mary’s most faithful refrain is not knowing. “We do not know. I do not know. She did not know.” Three times here.

Amid not having a clue what was going on, while having so little figured out, while not understanding Easter much at all...and while admitting that, declaring it, confessing it through grief and tears and the conflict of doubt and hope, that’s when Jesus shows up to greet Mary, to comfort her, to stay in relationship with her, to redirect her faith, to lead her again into life.

And also with you.

What do we say about that? Can we figure out how that all came together? Can we know what’s going on here?

For us on this Easter I’d really like to be able to explain it all. It would be nice to understand clearly and believe without a doubt. It’d be satisfying to have a grip on the facts. Helpful to explicate it in terms of implications for cellular biology and the conservation of elements.

I’d like to identify how it is that Jesus disappeared from the graveyard but reappears in this bread, and then trace how from this bread he takes on flesh in you. I’d like to help you see that in a mirror.

In your flesh, I’d like to resolve what it means that death has been undone, and even more to clarify why death still seems so persistent, though it has already and finally lost. I’d like to illustrate and realize your imaginations of innovative beginnings and fresh starts and endless joy of life that is wholly new.

I’d like to invigorate and encourage you forward into life with this invincible insurgent Spirit that won’t be stopped or stooped in fear by the B.S. that the authorities keep trying to swamp you in.

I’d like to offer instructions on how you tap into this undying love and inspirational life, for when your days do seem blah and it’s hard to go

on with your routines, and you're confused and you just shrug and weep. I'd like to predict how this makes you a better person and forecast the process of reconciliation that it must entail, the peace you'll receive.

I'd like to tell you how you'll see Jesus, what it will sound like when he calls your name, when you'll see dead loved ones again, how it keeps spreading and will finally culminate on earth, and evidently across the cosmos. I'd like to know.

To lead you again into life, I'd like to assure you that the fragrance of flowers and the warmth of sun and the trill of songbirds already understand the good news and embody it along with and ahead of you.

I believe and trust this all intensely. But most truly I don't understand. Like Mary, my faithful refrain is: "I don't know." It's strange and I can't explain. All I can do for now—with great joy, full of hope, in comfort and compassion, continuing with the vaguest notion that it is the best good news ever—is to proclaim:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!