

Through the Broken Trees
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I believe in the resurrection. ...Not just of Christ, but of ourselves.

It feels kinda weird to say those words. ...I actually can't believe I believe it.

Being a pastor, it might seem like a given that I *should*, but that's just not true.

As Christians, we can't always assume we all believe the same things.

There's so much in the bible, so much to our faith, and Christian culture...

There are always parts---things---we accept, and things we don't.

There are always things which settle more comfortably in our minds than others.

I know pastors and priests who look at the resurrection *symbolically*---

--not losing any value in its significance to their spiritual heart,

but not holding the same literal interpretation.

And I know pastors and priests who believe this event of Jesus' resurrection,

as an actual occurrence in the world---

---as something that truly did happen--- and something crucial

to our understanding of our Christian lives.

I actually used to lean more toward the first than the last.

Kind of weird. ...I never realized how much I doubted, until I believed.

I never realized how clearly these questioning thoughts rang in the back of my mind,

Causing me to wonder, ‘well... maybe the disciples,
so distraught, just fell into this state of hysteria
at the loss of their teacher, whom they loved so much they just couldn’t let him go.
---They couldn’t let the bad guys win, so they allowed Jesus
(this Yeshua bar Joseph, Jesus of Nazareth) to live on through these *stories*,
Feeling okay about it, because they knew he did truly live on anyway,
in their hearts, and their actions.’

Through the years, I never did *officially* take this stance---I never said I didn’t believe.
I never *believed* I didn’t believe. But through all of that time, I’d never fully accepted it
as truth.

...So what’s the difference, then, right?

Who knows. Maybe that’s why I enjoy atheists and agnostics so much.

Maybe my heart questions just as often---just as needfully---

---as theirs, when I think about this stuff,

Despite the fact that we come to different conclusions, at the end of it all.

I didn’t realize how much I doubted until I eventually, genuinely believed it was all true;

And this sudden realization and understanding only came recently, to me, actually.

---Just a few years ago, before I came to work here, and be with all of you.

It didn’t fully come to my heart until I saw it with my own eyes.

Our scripture reading from John, this morning,

stops when Mary walks into the room and says “I have seen the Lord!”

But just past this, it goes into these moments with the disciples,
where Jesus needs to show them the marks in his hands. The wound in his side.

The disciples see it, then believe. Past this, verse 24 goes on, saying:

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

And Thomas is swept away. ...By the unbelievable power of the sight of these things,

Thomas has no *choice* but to *know*;

and he believes with the rest of them, from that day forward.

So maybe I was a little like him. Maybe I needed to see it for myself.

And I did. Only weeks before I came to work here, as a pastor.

I've told you during a different morning of worship, together,
of that story of my grandpa, right after he died.

For those who weren't here, with us, and for those who don't remember:

The day my grandpa passed away, my family sat on the deck, outside,
just beginning to make arrangements for him.

They asked me to speak and help arrange things for his memorial,
being a pastor, and I agreed.

For awhile, we all sat around, trying to figure out what he might want,

And some said we didn't have time to do a few things at the service---

---there would be struggles in getting these things organized, so they would be left out.

One of these things was playing TAPS during the service.

My grandpa was a WWII veteran, and they thought it would be important, but just didn't feel we had the time or the means.

For those of you who were with us, then... do you remember?

I'd made plans that night to see someone for the first time in twenty years, and despite the roughness of the day, I didn't cancel them, because I didn't want to lose that reunion.

I didn't mention my grandpa's passing at all, to her, after getting together...

...not wanting to make this person I hadn't seen in so long, feel uncomfortable in the thought of us being together in the midst of this loss.

And I'd only talked with her about *writing*, through the night---not ministry stuff---
---since she was also a writer, and this was our common ground.

As she and I were standing outside, by the tables, and a man walked up to me,

His head shaven down---typical of a soldier.

His eyes were piercing blue. One of the traits which always stood out so firmly from my grandpa's own face.

He said nothing to me as far as introductions go. He only asked what I did for a living.

(An unusual question for a man to ask a young woman at a bar.

Usually the other way around, there, right?)

I told him I was a minister, and he immediately went on---

---no fluff between...no conversational filler---

To tell me he was a military chaplain, and that the two most important things to do

for a soldier's funeral were to play TAPS, and to fold the flag.

Then he just walked away. He didn't say another word. Not even goodbye.

But I was left understanding what my grandpa needed us to do.

What he needed me to tell the others.

And it was in that moment, that I was finally able to see----with my own eyes---

The beautiful truth of this story of the resurrection.

Then and only then, was I able to better understand

what Ky read about, this morning.

This moment when Mary was at the tomb, and she saw Jesus...

...but that Jesus didn't look like himself.

In the past I used to think... 'ah!---well...how convenient!'

Thinking myself just so smart, I'd imagine then that this might have just been

wishful thinking on Mary's part,

---not that this strangely-appearing figure standing in front of her

somehow held the spirit of this person she'd just lost, *within*,

Even after the moment of his death.

Not until that moment, standing stunned outside with my friend,

did I understand what it meant to see life take a new and different form,

In order to continue speaking. To continue to be, still conveying messages from their own heart.

Like with Thomas, it took a moment of *seeing*,

right in front of me, the truth of the way God moves us...

---For me to truly understand that what happened
 that morning to Mary and the disciples,
 Was very much possible, and somehow, miraculously, very likely true.
 It wasn't until this moment, that my grandpa somehow---
 ---don't ask me the technicalities of it, because I don't know them---
 ---after he'd passed in body, was able to still speak,
 and let me know how important it was to him, that these things be done for him,
 When we remembered him at his own funeral.

Now, like Thomas... like the disciples... you guys can believe it or not.

...But it still happened.

Like Thomas, we can explain away what happened with all sorts of rational processing,

Just as I used to, before that miraculous minute I witnessed, myself.

But I hope you're better off in soul than I was...than Thomas was,

and can be like those Jesus spoke of in verse 28 which,

after Jesus showed Thomas the marks, says:

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We're not always so fortunate to have God come speak to us face-to-face---

---to sort of give that splash of cold water to the skin, and *force* us to *know*.

Almost feels a little like using a cheat code in a complicated game.

I believe in the resurrection, because I've seen what the disciples saw, with my own eyes.

I've felt it with my own heart. And just like anything *else* I've *seen* and *felt*

to be true in the world around me---Water is wet. The sun reflects from glass---

I know the truth of what they said, because I've seen it happen in the world,
right in front of my eyes.

But how beautifully *blessed* are we when we haven't seen but still come to believe?

And just like the disciples in those days just following the crucifixion,

I just hope you might not think me crazy for saying the words, and reporting on what I saw.

Funny, because it all comes back to us. As modern Christians,
we really are living in the reality and work of the disciples, friends.

Hard to believe, but again, it's true, all the same.

So often we find ourselves in the same positions,
and we're certainly left with the very same tasks.

---That task of keeping these stories of the miracles of God
alive and breathing in the world,

So that others might come to know the power, and the truth,
and the beauty of the work of God's soul in our own.

We're faced with the same moments of account---of TELLING---

---just hoping people won't look at us like we're batty

when we talk about the unbelievable things God has done in our lives.

These moments in which we finally accept the unacceptable things God spills before our eyes,

Forcing us to know God is here, and to experience God

just as we experience any other thing---like the wind, like the heat of the sun---

---They change us. They change the way we see the world.

The way we experience ourselves and others.

This doesn't mean they'll be accepted as truth by those who hear of them,

but it also doesn't mean they cease to be true,

just because others doubt the amazingly beautiful things we've seen.

And it doesn't mean they don't forever transform who we are,

and the way we exist in this life.

Speaking on this transformation---this acceptance---

I've been doing a lot of *funerals*, lately. It's been sad for me... depressing.

But also very much life-*giving*---

---Life-*refreshing*, (again this resurrection of the soul in the midst of death)

because these moments we share with others in times of *loss*,

help us *gain* so much clarity and perspective in our experience of being alive, don't they?

One of the funerals I recently arranged was for a woman, named Mary Marsh.

I was blessed with the privilege of being with her, in her last moments.

During our time, together, we shared her final communion, and read from scripture, together.

She took my hand and told me the things she hoped for, in her funeral,

and asked me to lead her service, after she left.

This meant more to me than I can say,

without insulting the sacred-feeling we shared when she asked.

But she said something else to me, while we were sitting in her hospital room together,

that I hope I'll remember for a very long time.

...Maybe until the day I'm lying somewhere
with someone standing at the side of my own bed, later.

Just after she received news that there was nothing more
the doctors could do to sustain her life,
With tears in her eyes, my hand in hers, she told me that it was okay.

That everyone needed to die, and that it was just her turn.

She then went on to describe to me the fact
that she didn't know what waited for her on the other end,
but that she was willing to step ahead into whatever it might be.

That she was only sad because her birthday was coming up,
and she didn't want to miss her time with her family.

And because her 64th anniversary was coming up with her husband, this summer,
and that she wanted to be there with him for that, too.

Mary went on to say that she felt all right about it, though,
because she suspected she might be there with them, anyway.

After this, she shared with me that in her life, she felt closest to God,
---standing on top of a mountain one day, after an avalanche,
staring up into the light between all of those broken trees.

And that she knew life carried her here, and that life would carry her someplace else,
wherever that may be, and however that might look.

Something had changed Mary in her life, to lead her to say these things.

And I knew something had changed in me, too, because I believed her.

I believed her, because I knew these things to be true in my own soul.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that this was the beautiful reality of life waiting for us all.

And I hope I always remember those words. ... Those moments with Mary.

Because they so perfectly describe this transformation we experience in ourselves, when we come to know the peace of the life of God in our own.

What Mary said to me, in the shadows of that hospital room, her soul shining so bright, despite the death waiting around us...

Is this truth we come here to celebrate together today, in remembering the resurrection.

A moment I believe to be absolutely true. A moment

I thankfully now know was absolutely *possible* and *breath-taking* in its happening.

This morning, we come together to remember and celebrate the ways life changes us.

The ways life moves us from one spot to another...

...always within the infinite soul of the holy.

We come here to remember that we move from here to there in eternity, always taking different forms,

but always sustained, and loved, and supported,

by the loving embrace of the life of God, all the while.

And however we come to know this...

We're just lucky to be witness. Blessed to see, and understand.

Blessed to *believe*.

...Even when the stories we tell aren't accepted by those
who haven't yet experienced it in their own time.

Today, on this Easter Sunday, let's allow our souls
to freely rejoice in the fact that there is a life
so far beyond ourselves and what we can see from this one spot.

And to enjoy the mysteries which unfold before our eyes as God does what God does
with us.

With the people we love.

Like Mary Magdelene...like Mary Marsh....

...let's bathe in the glory of God's light all around us,
remembering that the life of the holy carries us forever.

And let's allow that understanding to transform us in ways we never expected...

...into something new. ...Amen.