

Matthew 28:1-10

In Matthew 26, an unnamed woman approaches Jesus at dinner and pours ointment on his feet along with her tears. The disciples reproach her for her extravagant behavior, but Jesus tells them to let her alone, saying, "By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial." And indeed she has. The women who go to the tomb in today's reading are not going to anoint the body, because in Matthew's view that's been done. They may not be going even to grieve. Matthew says that "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to **see** the tomb." They went to *see*.

I say that they may not have gone to grieve, because Jesus has told them that he will be raised, and maybe, astonishingly, they believed him. But still they wanted to see, so they visit the tomb. Roman guards have been stationed there to prevent any fooling around with the body, and the stone is still in place, blocking the opening of the tomb. But then an earthquake opens the tomb and an angel appears to confirm that Jesus has been raised. The angel tells the women not to fear, that Jesus has been raised and has gone before them to Galilee, so they should go tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. Off they go, afraid but also joyful, while the guards lie like dead men, overwhelmed by the acts of God that empowered the women. (Score one for the realm of God, minus one for the empire.) And Jesus, like a kid who can't wait on Christmas, does *not* meet them in Galilee, but meets them a few feet down the road, grinning from ear to ear, to tell them to go tell everyone else.

Matthew seems very intent on establishing that there had been no possibility of human interference with Jesus' body. There were guards outside the tomb, and the stone was not rolled away until the women were already present. Human beings had closed up Jesus' body in

the tomb, and human beings kept it closed while God was busy doing something out of sight. And isn't that the way it is? Don't we keep all kinds of things closed down, while God busies Godself doing something without our knowledge?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has written a memoir called *Surprised by God*, in which she tells about her journey from a youth of casual Jewishness to a young adulthood of defiant atheism to . . . an adulthood of being a passionate rabbi. Just a few chapters in, I was noticing how much her narrative is structured around what the women at the tomb did: going to see. Her mother worked at the Art Institute in Chicago, and Danya remembers her mother whispering "with the glee of a delighted child that was incapable of restraint, that it was amazing the way the yellows danced on the canvas. 'You can almost see them sweating on the blues, can't you,' she'd say, pointing to the upper-left corner with a look of pure joy on her face. 'Those ladies defy the sharp angles all over the rest of the painting. It's almost like you can hear them singing.'

"My mother was the first person to teach me that the real action in life happened not in the recesses of my brain, but right out there in front of my eyes. I had to be willing to look, though." (p. 32)

When Danya Ruttenberg was in college, her mother became terminally ill with cancer. You can imagine the anguish she went through--the ways she tried to cope, the pain that dogged her as she tried to move through her days, the questions she brought to her advisor, to the Hillel rabbi, to the college chaplain. She took spring semester off school, so she and her brother could keep their mother at home as her condition worsened. They tried to pretend everything would be okay, they raged against the inadequacy of human interventions, they went numb and just smoked and stared out the window. As with many of us, they had made an

art form of denial. Her mother, in fact, had always denied much of her reality: her desire to paint, her need to be free of a bad marriage, and now the terminal nature of her illness. But one day she seemed to be able to hear and accept that she was dying. And, Danya writes, "in this one moment of clarity and willingness to acknowledge where she actually was, . . . she effected a sort of redemption for all the times when she had refused to see or admit."

She did die, of course. And the family grieved, and life was hard. But also, behind the scenes, while human beings had done their best to lock death and dying away, God had been busy making plain the reality that they eventually saw: that her dying was, against all odds or apparent rationality, okay. That the wave, seeing the beach up ahead panics about crashing on sand, until it suddenly remembers that it's been water the whole time. That there's only ever been water. (p. 36) Her mother, Danya, their relationship would be different after her death, but not gone. Dying, she realized years later as a hospital chaplain, is utterly safe. There is no abyss, only waves.

Danya Ruttenberg is a rabbi, and resurrection is not part of her vocabulary. I don't want to impose our Christian concept on her Jewish story. But I do read there that she could not see the hand of God, that, in her words, "I saw no God out there to catch me," until she had spent a long time in darkness, and then, gradually, she did see God's presence. And that's what she wanted, though she didn't know what it would look like, and that's what Jesus' women friends wanted, and didn't know what it would look like.

Anne Lamott says,

Everything in us teaches us to put up walls and get the surface just right and never go out without the armor on. Then we come into circumstances where the armor and the wall won't work anymore--either because we're so sick, or because someone we love intimately is so sick, that we don't have the luxury of keeping the walls up and the surface looking nice and enviable.

It turns out to be, as my friend said about his facial disfigurement, an elaborately disguised gift from God. ...I have had the shield come down and it's like the wonderful Leonard Cohen song that there are cracks in everything and that's how the light gets in.

In Matthew's resurrection story, again, there is no talk of mourning. The women go to see the tomb. Jesus had taught that he must die and be raised. They've seen his predictions of crucifixion and burial come to pass. They come this morning awaiting resurrection. Three times in these first ten verses, and once in the final resurrection scene, the verb "to see" denotes encountering the risen Jesus. Matthew wants us to understand that when our eyes are open and our minds are alive and aware, we see that resurrection is reality.

Our experience of resurrection builds and compounds as we see it. Surely that's what it means, that Jesus shows up way ahead of schedule when the women have left the tomb and set off to tell the disciples that they should all go back to Galilee. They went to see, they saw, they took the next step, and they saw even more! Did they have to get to Galilee in order to see Jesus? Turns out not! He popped up when they took the next step! We talk a lot about how discipleship is hard, but let's notice today that also discipleship begets an ever-fuller experience of the realm of God. Acting in faith makes us able to see more of what we count on.

I wonder what the guards at the tomb saw. Not much, I imagine. For one thing, they lost consciousness, what with the earthquake and the angel with the bright face. For another thing, they were only looking for one thing, which was troublemakers trying to get into the tomb. Turns out the troublemaker was getting *out* of the tomb. But they didn't see that either. If they had known what resurrection looks like, would they have seen it? Listen to "The Invitation" by Mary Oliver:

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously

not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude –
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he
wrote:
You must change your life.

Let us pray: **Jesus meets us with the good news, reminding us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Let us remind one another as we go into the world—the Kingdom of heaven is like grace, it is like justice it is love and forgiveness and resurrection. Come let us rejoice in the Kingdom of God this Easter.**