

Easter, April 9 2023 Year A

Alleluia, Christ is risen from the dead.

The Lord is risen indeed Alleluia.

Who are you looking for, this Easter? If you are looking for the risen Christ, don't worry, he will find you.

And so in today's Easter Gospel from John Mary of Magdala peers into the tomb looking for a body, and Jesus is waiting for her in the garden. Peter and the beloved disciple poke around among the empty burial linens, but Jesus will meet them on the seashore later in the gospel.

Everyone in the Easter stories encounters the risen Jesus differently. Outside the tomb, walking through locked doors, traveling on the road to Emmaus, making breakfast by the Sea of Galilee, in untold encounters that the Scriptures only allude to. There is no one way to encounter Christ— there wasn't one then and there isn't one now.

But there is one thing that these stories all have in common. Those who are longing for Jesus don't find him -- Jesus finds them. But what they bring to the encounter is still essential -- their longing, their searching, their desire for the Christ.

So the guy in the garden asks Mary: Whom are you looking for?

She answers: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Which is the long way of saying: I'm looking for Jesus.

And at that point she realizes that he has been there the whole time. She didn't recognize him until she heard the sound of her own name. And even then the encounter was on Jesus' terms. The risen Christ had found her.

I think this is how it might work for us as well, we who are looking for signs of the Risen Christ. We might be surprised to encounter him in places where we are not looking, stories not of our own making, in images that we didn't paint. Very often those have footprints of the risen Christ's all through them. For example, consider this story from the Okanagan (oh-can-Ah-gun) native peoples called "How Turtle Set the Animals Free." ¹

Eagle was fast and strong and powerful, and Eagle was proud. He would challenge each of the animals to a race, and one by one he would beat them. He took on the Deer, the Fox, the Bear and lastly Wolf. They all lost to Eagle. And when they lost to Eagle, they became Eagle's slaves. Soon all the animals were slaves to Eagle, except for Turtle and his friend, Muskrat. The only reason they were still free was that they refused to race Eagle. They knew ahead of time that they couldn't win. But one night Turtle had a

¹ <http://www.domcentral.org/library/spir2day/91431mckenna.html> From the story collecting of Megan McKenna, who taught a similar story to my friend Bob Kloos. The final paragraph is from his retelling.

dream, and he was told: "You must race Eagle and you must free all the Animal People. You must all be free when the People-to-be come."

The next morning Turtle woke Muskrat, and they went swimming together and he told him, "We must get ready and race Eagle." Muskrat was upset. "You will lose. No one can beat Eagle. He's too fast. We will end up as slaves too." "I know," said Turtle, "but my dream said I must and my dream said that I will win." So off they went to see Eagle. And Turtle approached Eagle and said solemnly: "I want to race you tomorrow."

Eagle laughed but agreed. He wanted to beat all the animals. "When the Sun comes up, we will run, and as you request, if you win, then all the Animal People are yours. But if I win, Turtle, I will keep you. You are betting your life on this race." "Yes," said Turtle, "I know." As Turtle crawled off, all the Animal People started to laugh. They knew Eagle would win, but they were sad too because they didn't think they'd ever be free again. The next morning it began. "Choose your place, Turtle. I will race any distance you decide upon." "Any place?" Turtle asked. Eagle replied loudly: "Any place, Turtle. Let the Animal People hear me." Immediately, Turtle said: "Then carry me up high in the air, as high as you can go. Then I will tell you when to drop me. From the moment you drop me, the race begins. Whoever reaches the ground first is the winner."

Eagle began to worry, but he had spoken so he took Turtle into his claws and started to climb. Higher and higher he went. Then Turtle yelled out: "Okay, let me go!" Eagle dropped him, and Turtle fell. He fell fast like a rock or a stone. Eagle went after him and tried to catch him but Turtle yelled out: "EEEEEEEEEE! Hurry Eagle! I will beat you." Then Turtle pulled his head and neck and feet inside his home as he fell faster and faster.

The Animal People watched in horror and fascination. They began to shout for Turtle. Muskrat his friend, jumped all around with his tail high in the air. His friend was winning, but Eagle was close! Then he thought: "Poor Turtle, he will fall so hard. He will hit the ground and crack apart, my friend!" Turtle did hit the ground hard, like a rock. It was very quiet.

Then Turtle crawled out, shaken but happy. "Now," he said, "You are all free again, free forever! Go wherever you wish, Animal People, anywhere. You are free." The Animal People scattered away, delighted. Everywhere they went they would tell the People-to-be about these races and how Turtle set them all free.

Then Turtle turned to Eagle. "You know I could never beat you, Eagle, but I had a dream and learned how to do it. Soon the People-to-be will come and you will be the fastest bird. You will be their standard bearer and none of the Animal People will be able to beat you. But, Eagle, I dreamed and learned from my dream. The people will learn from their dreams too, just as I did."

This Okanagan story sings Easter to me, and reminds me of something that I often fail to see in the traditional Easter story that has become perhaps too familiar to me. It is that the story of Easter is a story about freedom, about the liberation of people who dream of being free. God finds them in that dream. God dreams it too.

If we are looking for the risen Christ that is what we are looking for. When Christ finds us that is what he offers. Freedom – freedom from our previous allegiances and masters, masters that include fear and death and greed and privilege and power and dominance. All those things that Eagle represents.

I saw an article from the Atlantic recently by Derek Thompson who argued that the “most potent of the new religions competing for congregants” is workism.²

Workism is “the idea that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose; and the policy to promote human welfare must always encourage more work.”

The article is entitled *Workism is Making Americans Miserable*. If that’s the case for you, you may be dreaming of freedom, you may be looking for the Risen Christ.

Accepting the freedom that Christ offers when he finds us means letting go of the previous masters, dying to practices that enslave us, damage our souls. That is what sin is – not bad choices, but unrelenting service to forces that oppose God’s dream.

And here’s an ironic thing about being found by Christ, and freed by Christ. If we live into the freedom that Jesus’ resurrection brings, that means that we belong to God. We are servants of God.

Finders keepers. Being found by Jesus implies being kept by Jesus – not the other way around. Perhaps this is why Jesus tells Mary not to hold on to him – because you can’t possess or control or detain the risen Christ.

Our churches are not zoos for the divine that we visit occasionally to get a glimpse of God. The Bible is not a container for God, who becomes available to us whenever we flip open the cover. Our creeds do not hold God, or shape God or even define God very well.

If God dwells in us, it is not in a way that we can control or lock down. But to dwell in God, to be kept by the Divine, well that’s another matter.

The Good News of Easter is this -- If you are searching for the risen Christ, he will find you. Often he will find you in the places where you are not looking, and you will recognize him in ways you didn’t count on. And pretty soon if you keep it up, you will begin to see the risen Christ everywhere. And you will realize that you are no longer searching for Christ, but following Christ.

We do not come to this place week after week to search for the risen Christ, **but to follow him** in the sure knowledge that he has been with us the whole time.

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The Lord is risen indeed Alleluia.

² “Workism is Making Americans Miserable” by Derek Thompson, The Atlantic, Feb. 24, 2019.