

Rise above

Easter 23: Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18 & Matthew 28:1-10

Rev Jean Shannon

We have two very different stories here and I am not going to compare them in any way. I want you to sit – **with** the difference; **with** the stories. There is no right or wrong here – there are commonalities. I want you to rise above the text – and see the greater story and what that might mean to us.

Be careful not to frame this story with goodies and baddies. We could waste energy blaming Judas, or “the Jews” or the hierarchy or the Romans. Each gospel has a different point of view. Rev John Squires said:

“The trap we must avoid, then, is this: do not read the Gospel narratives as straightforward, unadorned historical narratives. Do not accept “at face value” all that is recorded in those chapters. Apply careful, reasoned criticism as you approach the text.” This is not a story about goodies and baddies – it is bigger than that. It is about humans, their failings and God.

Matt Laney talked about what he learned from his preaching masters. He said preaching fails when all it does is give ‘thoughts for the day’ – something to mull over during lunch rather than inspiring personal transformation. I love it when you say, “you certainly gave me something to think about” but I live and pray that one day, someone will say, “wow, you changed my life!”.

No pressure here - but Laney said so much of preaching is like talking *about* medicine to a sick person. I’ve noticed so much of preaching is about curious/interesting, well-I-didn’t-know THAT-Bible facts...which to be frank, is pretty much like casting the seeds on the stones and walking away. (I just planted my winter vegies – so maybe that’s colouring my metaphors). The alternative – which really turned me away was all about THIS is what YOU should believe...which is a little like a dictator lecturing you on freedom.

Thinking about how Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener – set my imagination on fire. What is it that we are trying to nurture here? What is the purpose of these stories and traditions?

And to figure that – we have to rise above the intricacies and differences in text. Differences that are created by time and politics and unconscious bias (ours and the author’s). Differences that are created by cultural perspectives, intended readers and

agendas. Matthew was Jewish writing for what he assumed was a Jewish readership. John was writing in a different context with a different purpose.

And we have to rise above our own politics and prejudice; our own need to win; our own sense of unworthiness; our hunger for substitute fulfillment.

Jesus was tested in life. He struggled for an authentic human life and died a fully human death. He knows our human failings; the promises broken; the good intentions and the endless striving for self-perfection and actualisation. Do you think God is interested in our self-help projects? Or rather, could our deity be a loving presence that just wants to bring us home? To protect us under the wing...¹ Are you worried about judgement? Who best to judge us than the one whose visceral passion for weakness makes it impossible for Him to condemn us?² We don't need to worry about worthiness.

We need to rise above the hungry monster that is our addictions – our substitutes used to stuff our lives in the vain belief we will feel full – but we don't. Ask the monster what it needs and it will ask for more. But ask God what you deeply need and you can transform that emptiness into a nurturing vessel, a well of transformative love – a jug of water that bubbles WITH life.

Why or why would we worship a man on a cross? Because he rose above – above death and politics; above literalism to faith; because he dragged us up with him from a darkness we could not understand to a light of promise and hope – far beyond the physical.

As the Bible tells us Herod tried to kill him as a baby – the whole story is improbable, impossible but still, we are here today to bear witness. Mahatma Gandhi is credited with saying: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you. Then they fight you, then you win.”

“The power of resurrection is the power to step outside the prescribed models of assimilation, to resist the presumed safety of hiding or running, and to be the authentic presence God created us to be.”³

Jesus may have died on that cross but that he is here today is witness in you. YOU are here today. All is not lost – in fact, it was the birth of hope that compels us today.

¹ Ps91 - He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. Matthew 23:37 ...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks **under** her **wings**, and you were not willing.

² Mary Luti, *The Throne of Grace*

³ Kenneth L Samuel, *Rejected then resurrected*

When we rise above the details – what remains is love. Mary’s undying love. Jesus’ undying message. Rev’d Sue Grace said this:

“Love is not magic but it is powerful. Love will endlessly beckon, call and challenge but will not force itself upon us. Love will confront, confound and convert us. Moment by moment, day by day, love will present itself to us. For love is not just a sentiment for special feast days. It is the very real and ordinary pleasure of living in communion with those we love – our family and friends – in places of familiarity and beauty. It is the call to love those we do not yet know – neighbour and stranger – in very practical ways. And even more profoundly it is the challenge to love those we would rather not know – the unlovely and hard to love – in ways that meet their needs and gives their lives meaning and hope. Love, the great ideal and claim of religion, only becomes real when we enact it in our lives, allowing ourselves to be loved and loving others. This is the power and promise of Easter.

Jesus was the living water for parched people. We would never say to a dehydrated person, “what are your beliefs about water?”⁴ If He only talked about love, it wouldn’t have mattered much. Instead, he lived love pouring it out until cups overflowed.

These are not just stories. We have work to do to resurrect our communities; our friendships; our respect for others; our spiritual well-being and our planet.

So don’t get bogged down in the details. Rise above. Don’t just look at your garden, look at the whole ecology. You don’t just need water and seeds, You need good soil, microbes; bees; flowers a whole community to sustain and flourish. You can’t talk a garden up – you need to get your hands dirty.

Easter is more than eggs or destruction. It is a story of rising above and being part of a new beginning. It is a starting point – not an end.

Shelah

⁴ Matt Laney, *Thirst*