

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn

April 5, 2015

Theme: Faith

Homily: Rising Up!

### **Call to Worship:**

Shake out your qualms. Shake up your dreams.

Quit your addiction to sneer and complain.

You are closer to glory leaping an abyss than upholstering a rut.

At every crossroad be prepared to bump into wonder.

Only love prevails.

Lift your ineffable out of the mundane.

Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms!

--selection from "Easter Exultet" by James Broughton

### **First Reading: John 20:1-18 read by Thomas Stumpf**

*The Resurrection of Jesus*

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them,

‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**Time for All Ages – A Body Prayer lead by Debra Zageski (as inspired by the Nuns of Cuernacava and Marta Valentin)**

1. Placing our feet on the earth, we feel it’s energy flow through us, offering its support and nurture to us. Relax your body into the earth.
2. Bringing our hands together one over the other and touching your heart. We recognize our authentic selves. We feel our emotions, where we are in this moment. We give thanks to be here now in this day that we have been given.
3. Bringing our hands down, palms open facing up in a gesture of gratitude. We are grateful for those present with us here today and we remember our past, all that brought us here; grateful for all of what has made us who we are.
4. Extending our arms out, palms facing down, we reach for the good, the sacred, we share our yearning to connect, to love and to be loved.
5. Bringing our arms up to the sky, we give thanks for the air that we breathe, for the life giving rain, the warmth of the sun. We acknowledge the immense beauty and mystery of the universe.
6. Coming back down we bend and touch the ground, we express thanks for the earth. We acknowledge that sometimes we do not even recognize that we walk on sacred ground. We offer our prayer of gratitude for all that the earth brings to us.

7. Standing up we bring our hands up to touch our forehead, to our minds eye as we ask for clarity and for the vision to find new ways to live and love.
8. Bringing our hands out to our sides we touch fingertip to fingertip to those near to us grateful for our community. For we have risen once again and we rejoice in the life that makes all things new. We breathe in and together we call out in unison - Alleluia! Alleluia!

### **Second Reading: “The Waves” by Louis Jenkins**

The east wind has risen today and the waves rise up. Praise to all rising up! To the life that seemed might never return after so many days of dead calm. The wind sends wave after wave scudding toward the shore where the ragged tufts of grass cling to the rock. Waves. I recognize some of these waves. They lift from the void, white-haired but determined, as if each had a purpose, a private destiny, someplace to go. (Brunch? A board meeting?) Once the savior walked across the water to give each wave, personally, a hand up. Perhaps he is returning even now, but the road to the shore is long, long.... The waves break and fall face forward, losing touch, losing credibility, losing all pretense of dignity.

### **Homily: Rising Up!**

Praise to all rising up!  
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!  
Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms!  
Only love prevails.  
'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!'

The poet, looking out at the ocean, says he recognizes some of these waves. They lift from the void, white-haired but determined, as if each had a purpose, a private destiny, someplace to go. Each wave is a new creation of the ancient sea.

Easter, like the ocean, resists all our attempts to tame it. Beneath the flowers and the marshmallow Peeps beats a drum of triumph and shock and ecstasy and fear. Easter is a story we can't explain—

though people have spent thousands of years  
trying to do just that.

Each year we revisit Easter and it tastes a little different. (And it's not just  
because Cadbury changed their recipes.)

A poet I quoted a few Sundays ago said:

“I can't talk about God and make any sense,  
And I can't not talk about God and make any sense.

So we talk about the weather,  
and we are talking about God.”<sup>1</sup>

Crocuses pushing through melting snow,  
daffodils rising through the mud,  
sunshine piercing the cold fog of spring:  
we are talking about the weather,  
and we are talking about God.

Praise to all rising up!  
Prepare ye the way of the Lord!

The Easter story begins not in joy, but in suffering.  
It begins not in community, but in loneliness.

Mary Magdalene walks to the cemetery in the early morning twilight.  
There is no electrical light, no streetlamps or flashlights.  
When she comes to the tomb,  
her eyes peer into the dimness,  
she is shocked at what she sees.

The stone blocking the tomb has been rolled away.

She can't bear to look inside.  
The only explanation she probably could think of  
is that the grave has been desecrated by robbers.  
She runs to tell the other disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Barrett, “What's in the Temple?”

The two men run to the cemetery in what sounds like a bumbling comedy of errors—

one is ahead, then another takes the lead,  
the one who gets there first just peeks his head into the tomb,  
then the other pushes him aside and actually goes in.  
They see nothing except the cloth that had wrapped Jesus's body.  
They see emptiness.  
They do not recognize what has happened.

These two disciples back away from the tomb,  
shaking their heads, shrugging.  
They have no words of comfort for Mary,  
who stands there weeping,  
no words at all.  
They turn silently around and go home.

They went home too early.

Because as Mary stands there sobbing, angels appear,  
and then—Jesus appears.  
But it is still dark, and her eyes are clouded with tears, so she does not  
recognize him.

She doesn't see that someone holy is standing before her.

She thinks he is just a gardener,  
whose job it is to tend the graveyard.  
She begs him to tell her where Jesus' body may have been taken.  
With one word he cuts through her agitation and her grief. He says her  
name.

“Mary!” he says.

He has risen up.  
He has lifted from the void, solid and determined.  
He has a purpose, a private destiny, someplace to go.

And so, when Mary moves to embrace him,  
Jesus backs away.  
The words that he says in Latin are

*Noli me tangere.*

You can interpret that a few ways.

“Touch me not!”

“Don’t tread on me!”

“Don’t hold on to me!”

“Don’t cling to me!”

In the many artworks inspired by these words over the centuries, artists have imagined all kinds of ways this scene may have looked.

The many ways that Jesus might have bent and twisted his body away from Mary Magdelene’s touch.

It’s worth a Google image search.

In one painting, Jesus holds two hands up, almost a karate stance, defensive, his face is stern. Back off, Mary.

In another painting, Jesus holds a staff in one hand, a barrier, while his other hand is gathering up his robes away from her, almost daintily. Ugh, Mary.

In many paintings, Jesus raises his hand outstretched, palm down, fingers open, lips open, his eyes wide and sad—he wishes to touch her but can’t. Oh Mary.

However we picture it, it is an awkward reunion: Mary wants to run into his arms and embrace him, let her tears run from her face to his. Caress his cheek, feel his incarnation.

She is ready to break like a wave and fall face forward, losing all pretense of dignity.

But he says,  
“Do not hold on to me, do not cling to me.  
I am rising up. I am free. Rise up, Mary. You are free.  
Tell the others. It is time to rise. Only love prevails.  
Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms!”

Praise to all rising up!

We can't talk about Easter and make any sense,  
But we can't not talk about Easter and make any sense, either.  
So we talk about spring, and we are talking about Easter.

The Easter story is like the ocean, vast and deep,  
extending far past the limits of our sight  
but so close we can plunge right into it.  
Depending on where we are standing on the shore, depending on what waves  
happen to be rising up and crashing down in our lives,  
Depending on the weather far out at sea and over our heads,  
This story will look different.

My favorite part about this version of the resurrection, John's version—  
because of course each Gospel tells the story differently—is that Mary  
doesn't recognize Jesus.  
Jesus!

She just thinks he is a gardener.  
She's looking right at him,  
but it is only when he speaks her name  
that she really sees him.

I am reminded of the famous composer Philip Glass.

Even as he was gaining recognition for his music,  
he continued working as a taxi-driver and a plumber.  
Most people would never have known that  
the man driving them crosstown or fixing their toilet  
was a man celebrated for transforming people's lives  
with his music.

One day he was on a job,  
installing a dishwasher in an apartment.  
He heard a noise and looked up to find Robert Hughes,  
the art critic of Time magazine, staring at him in disbelief.

Hughes said,  
'But you're Philip Glass! What are you doing here?'

Philip Glass said, "It was obvious  
that I was installing his dishwasher  
and I told him I would soon be finished.

'But you are an artist,' he protested.

I explained that I was an artist  
but that I was sometimes a plumber as well  
and that he should go away and let me finish."

Do not cling to me, says the Great Artist.  
"But you are Jesus!" I can imagine Mary saying,  
as she wipes away her tears in disbelief.

And Jesus might say:  
"Yes, but I am also a gardener,  
and I have many lives to tend to, Mary,  
so many seeds to plant and souls to nurture.  
This Garden is not Eden. There is work to be done.  
Don't hold on to me. I am rising up.  
Everything transforms!"

There are so many people we encounter in the world whom we might think:

That's just a gardener  
just a taxi-driver, just a tax-collector  
just a lawyer, just a cop  
just a teenage troublemaker.

That's just my neighbor whose yard signs I disagree with.  
That's just a stranger, asking for spare change.



And then one day the fog begins to lift,  
the sun starts to rise and brighten the sky  
and suddenly we can see:

all these people shine from within, they are rising up  
they are as holy and beautiful and beloved by God  
as you are  
as Jesus was  
as any newborn innocent child ever was  
and always shall be.

Ah, we might say then.  
I recognize you now.  
You too have a purpose, a private destiny, someplace to go.

What is our purpose?  
As we rise up and move towards the day we will crash on the shore,  
What is our purpose?

In the words of theologian Andrew Linscott:

“[The] Great Lie which our culture relentlessly feeds us  
[is this]:  
that the purpose and meaning of human life is to be happy.

...But you need only to zoom-out slightly  
from the affluent pockets of the United States  
to realize that the meaning of life is many things  
to many people,

but it is certainly not about being happy.  
For most people in this world,  
the meaning of life is simply how to put food on the table; how to acquire  
medicine for their gaunt babies;  
how to shield their children from the drunken rage of their spouses;  
how to keep their young sons from taking up rifles and going off to war....

**Our purpose** is to overcome the muggy, mindless haze of everyday life and instead develop a sensitivity to the reality of other people, with their sorrows and struggles; to cultivate the spiritual maturity to confront and deeply engage suffering and death; to give ourselves over to laughter and joy and to pause in the face of the nearly-imperceptible radiance of the ordinary; to partner together in community to paint our small corner of the world more beautiful.”

We can live into this purpose, my friends.  
We can lift the ineffable out of the mundane.  
“We are an Easter people, living in a Good Friday world.”<sup>2</sup>  
‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord!’

Feel how your feet are grounded beneath you.  
Join with me, let us place our hands on our hearts.  
Hold our hands up in gratitude.  
Our arms out, yearning for more.  
Our arms up, recognizing the mystery, so much we will never understand.  
Our eyes seeking wisdom and the way forward.  
Our hands reaching out, shoulder to shoulder  
fingertip to fingertip  
Not holding on, but lifting up:  
Each of our bodies filled with the flowing of  
spirit, blood, energy, passion,  
each of our incarnated bodies a miracle.  
Our hearts bursting with love for each other, for this world, for all that is  
rising.

Praise to all rising up!  
Praise for the morning!  
Nothing perishes; nothing survives; everything transforms!  
Alleluia!  
*Amen!*

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Johnson, as quoted in Anne Lamott’s *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*