

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sunday of the Resurrection
April 9, 2023

Lectionary Year A: John 20:1-18

The church of my adolescent years in Fargo, North Dakota is where I became involved in many of the ministries that, one might say, prepared me for some of the duties of priesthood. At many junctures along the way during those years, I could be found serving as an acolyte (and later lay assisting minister), reading the lessons, singing in a vocal ensemble, or reporting back from a youth gathering. And what made -- and still makes -- that church unique was and is its "Hour of Worship" television broadcast which has aired every Sunday on WDAY, channel 6, since 1967.

Well, every Sunday except one. On Memorial Day weekend, the "Hour of Worship" is pre-empted by...anyone want to take a guess...the Indianapolis 500.

Somewhere in Mom and Dad's basement there's an archive of VHS tapes that may contain "Hour of Worship" broadcasts featuring a teenaged me doing something at Messiah Lutheran Church on a Sunday morning. Long before everyone was on the air with livestreams, such appearances were thought to merit recording because we just thought they were so special. Today, those recordings could be leveraged as bribery against me provided one has a VHS machine to play them on...

Looking back, the post that I would've held most frequently was acolyte. Kids like me were recruited from confirmation classes with the promise that serving as an acolyte could release one from other obligations of the program. Then, on some off day apart from Sunday, us freshly recruited acolytes-to-be were trained in the finer points of candle-lighting, torch-bearing, and handing the offering

plates to the ushers. But back then, the processional cross at Messiah was so heavy and unwieldy that, if one were to serve as crucifer, one needed to be a football player (or equivalent); thus, that job would never have gone to scrawny little me. And the processional cross was only used on high festivals, anyway.

Big, heavy objects, though, like that processional cross, convey a permanence and a stability that little, flimsy objects can never convey. It's a bit jarring to think now of how that very substantial processional cross stood amongst all of the spindly, Space Age altar furnishings that dated back to when the church was built in 1963! The acolytes didn't have to try to hide behind any of that spindly, Space Age furniture, however; we had the entire choir in front of us, and I, of course, was always well-behaved in church!

But the thing I never got to do -- be that football-player-sized crucifer -- is one of the things I remember most clearly. That heavy, unwieldy processional cross probably would've toppled over in my grasp and taken me with it! Yet I don't think that processional crosses of such heft are so made to simulate for the crucifer what Jesus went through; rather, their imposing appearance is to lend a dignity and presence to the liturgy and liturgical space that a smaller, flimsier object wouldn't convey.

Not surprisingly, large, heavy, imposing objects figure prominently in the accounts of Christ's suffering, death, burial, and resurrection. Think, for example, of the stone that was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb where Jesus was buried; that stone was put there out of a concern for both permanence and security. But then, what do we find out this morning? The Gospel of John tells us, "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" (John 20:1). So, what kind of physics were at work here? Is this the source of dumb theological questions like "Could God make a stone so heavy that he couldn't move it?" I suppose the answer to that would have to be "no" because the laws of physics don't apply to God. But the rolling away of the stone and the absence of Jesus' body from the tomb should make one thing clear: The resurrection is real and this is not simply an instance of immortality.

The difference between resurrection and immortality is pretty basic. Resurrection requires a person to really die. Immortality, going back to the Latin roots of the word, indicates that one does not die at all, but is instead freed from the physical realm and all its limitations. Furthermore, if one is immortal, why would one need to be buried, or even consent to being buried? The death and resurrection of Christ brings us the hard, heavy reality that Christ was both true man and true God and hence died a human death and was raised by his heavenly Father. But our God is no stranger to heavy things. Certainly, the God who rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb could also hear the prayers, bear the sufferings, and forgive the sins of his not-always-faithful children. And amazingly, God doesn't give up on us...even though we misunderstand, stumble, and fail to see his presence in our lives.

So, as we ponder these facts, let us take another look at our Gospel text, and particularly at the scene with Mary weeping outside the tomb. Mary is clearly distressed because "they have taken away [her] Lord" (John 20:13b). Understandably, what we take to be a jubilant occasion -- our Lord's resurrection -- was not taken the same way by the resurrection's first witnesses. And then there's the matter of Mary not recognizing Jesus when he appears to her (John 20:14ff.). Why can't she recognize him? The text goes so far as to mention, "Supposing him

to be the gardner" (John 20:14b). It's hard to figure out why this is the case, apart from speculating that Mary's tears might've blurred her vision or the low light of that time of day made it difficult for her to make out Jesus' features. Or, maybe she was a greater distance away from him than we imagine. To this, I would add the obvious: None of Jesus' associates expected him to be raised from the dead, and raised the way he was.

Accounts of the first Easter in the Gospels are fairly consistent insofar as they depict an initial fear and uncertainty among the resurrection's first witnesses, in contrast to the joy and celebration we tend to experience all these centuries later. Speaking personally, I get this. Even though Jesus left occasional hints of his death and resurrection throughout the story, how were the disciples to know that this would be the way it would all take place? In the thick of the situation, we might not have known any better than they did!

So how do we do when things get heavy? Having studied both philosophy and theology, I can tell you that there's plenty out there that's not easy to process. I remember getting stuck on individual sentences in some dusty tome that would take me hours to figure out. Sure, things might've come a little faster to my smarter friends, but who's to say that they weren't slowed down a bit, too? Eventually, I found that, with the heavy stuff, it was helpful to go to someone who could do the heavy lifting -- say, a professor or a trusted colleague.

Incidentally, even though I never carried that big, unwieldy processional cross in my years serving as acolyte at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fargo, we always had somebody who could!

Thus, there may be a call to us here -- a call to rely on the power of God, who

raised his Son from the dead, and thereby brought us victory over death. If all this is too heavy for us, we can turn it over to God in prayer, and it won't be too heavy for God! The answers might not come immediately, but they will over time in the occasional epiphany or spiritual awakening. Thereafter, we might even find ourselves going forth, like Mary, with announcements of "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18b).

But be assured that any bewilderment beforehand is perfectly natural...

As we celebrate the resurrection this morning, let us not lose sight of how heavy this event was and still is. But then, may we also have our hearts and minds transformed by the sheer awe and greatness of the festival of Easter. The former is the resurrection event alone, and the latter is our celebration of it. And today, we walk that path with Mary Magdalene from tears of sadness and bewilderment to joyous announcements of "I have seen the Lord."

Sometimes, things have to be heavy in order to convey dignity and permanence. Sometimes God reveals himself to his people in moments that shake the earth and rattle the seas. And sometimes we might cower in fear at it all. But God never leaves us there. We move from Good Friday to Easter, from tears to triumph, from death to resurrection.

Remember, we can't have one without the other and not make a mockery of both. But God will be with us through it all, whether it's the heavy lifting or the joyous celebrating. With God, we don't need a football player to carry the cross or a powerful mind to grasp God's mysteries; we need only dwell in the promise of our Lord's resurrection. In there is the good news that will carry us through the perils of this world into eternal life.

Amen.