

EASTER DAY
24 APRIL 2011
ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
BEVERLY FARMS, MA

“Alleluia, Christ is Risen” : “The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!”

At the Diocesan Pre-Lenten retreat in Ipswich this February, forty clergy spent three days in the Spiritual Care of the new Bishop Suffragan of Los Angeles, the Right Rev. Mary Glasspool. In the midst of many helpful meditations, Bishop Mary introduced us to the work of Richard Lewis, Director of the Touchstone Center in New York City, and an article he published a few years ago entitled "*The First Question of All*".

Lewis' article is about the child's question "Why?" concerning almost anything in the universe. A child asks an adult "Why?" and the adult usually answers "Because . . ." and with as precise a reason as possible; only to have the child say, yet again, "But, why?"

Lewis maintains such interrogations are far more than just "attention-getting devices." Their "Why?", Lewis says, stems not so much from curiosity, but the nagging suspicion that for everything we understand there is a reason - a real reason which brought it into being in the first place. If it snows, why did it snow? and if it snows because it was cold and moist, then why is it cold and moist? - and so on . . . Somewhere in childhood we all became root-diggers, possessed with the ability draw to the surface reasonable facts about life - only to dive down again in order to find out what was below those facts: what startling amount of ground and mud and water and darkness and heat held things together.

Mr. Lewis asked a group of seven and eight-year-olds a series of questions about the sky, not unlike some of the questions they might have asked themselves. Here are the questions with some of the answers the children gave.

How heavy is the sky?

It's heavier than a little kid.

How far is the sky?

It's farther than India, Africa, and the North Pole.

What does the sky feel like?

Cotton, pillows, and softness.

How would you get to the sun?

You would tippy-toe.

How big is the sky?

The sky is about four inches. It's about as big as a blue whale.

What does the sky sound like?

It sounds like a bird whistling. It sounds like an ocean. It sounds like popping.

How big is the sky?

It's bigger than a planet. It's a million inches long.

The children's answers, like the questions themselves, pull at the boundaries of reality so that what we can "know" is given a richer dimension of possibility. And note that the questions are taken quite seriously by the children, and answered. Because of the way young children think - given their buoyancy of thought and their

ability to transpose one reality into another - we as adults cannot help applauding them for their startling turn of perception and poetic insightfulness!

Mr. Lewis concludes by saying that much of the impulse by the child to play with questions such as these is the tantalizing feeling that such questions give us permission to answer in a way that enriches our sense of the real. For some persons, this kind of reality may be too threatening or unstable to tolerate for a long period of time. But for the child, the curiosity to ask such questions is a paramount part of childhood.

On this Easter morning, we may find ourselves in a questioning place. Why did these two women go so early to the tomb? Why the earthquake? Why the shining messenger? Why does Jesus go before the disciples to meet them in Galilee?

Perhaps, we should listen to the story again ...

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

As those of you who have worked with Lynda after Soup Supper on Wednesday nights will recognize, there is much that is unique in this account. In Matthew's telling, we have exactly two witnesses, both named Mary, who rise before dawn to go to sit beside the tomb. Since only Matthew tells us of the chief priests' demands that the tomb be sealed and guarded, the two Mary's don't go to anoint Jesus' body, but rather to grieve the loss of their rabbi. Only Matthew narrates the exact moment when a great earthquake opens the grave and frightens the guards to near death. Only Matthew attempts to describe the messenger/angel's dazzling appearance. Clearly Matthew invites us to wonder about these super-natural occurrences. This is not just "a day in the life"; this is "a day never to be forgotten".

Matthew also carefully separates experience of the empty tomb from the first meeting with the Risen Jesus. The Marys do as they are told, Matthew tells us. Once again, the Evangelist's details are unique. The two women leave "quickly", "with fear and joy", "they run to tell the others". Matthew wants us to be caught up in the jumble of terror and wonder in this moment. The women seek to return to the community of followers they have lived with these past few years. They want to weigh the anxiety and the hope they now know with their community. Running is their clearest instinct.

It is only then, in full sprint, that these witnesses meet Jesus, or more importantly, as Matthew tells us, Jesus meets them: "Hail", he says: greetings, grace, shalom, peace. Jesus uses the universal opening which conveys both welcome and blessing. And the wondering women reach, not for his arms to embrace, but for his feet to

worship. They touch his body in loving adoration. And then, as is so characteristic of Matthew, the first message is restated. “Do not be afraid”, “go tell the others to return to Galilee” ... “there you will see me”.

Friends we do well to emblazon this scene and these words in our minds. We do well to gather regularly and intentionally and tell this story to each other, most especially to our children. And we do well to wonder, for the day of Resurrection shapes everything else that we are, everything that we do.

Dan Woolley is a Web-based media developer for the Christian non-profit Compassion International. In January of 2010 he was in Haiti filming women and their children who had been served by programs sponsored by the ministry. He described to an internet interviewer the unlikeliness of the trip, “Initially, I wasn’t even supposed to go on this trip. Compassion has a video manager who would hire a videographer and he couldn’t go because of a scheduling conflict. We had a second person who would ordinarily go, but she was pregnant and couldn’t make it. I was the third in line. In my career after college, this kind of experience (in Haiti) would have been very rare.”

On Tuesday, January 12, Woolley and his co-worker David Hames were returning to their rooms in the Hotel Montana after a day of filming when the quake struck. “I just saw the walls rippling and just explosive sounds all around me,” said Woolley, recounting the earthquake to MSNBC. “It all happened incredibly fast. David yelled out, ‘It’s an earthquake,’ and we both lunged and everything turned dark.” Woolley is nearsighted and lost his glasses in the quake. But by using the focusing light on his camera and taking pictures of the rubble, he was able to figure out where he was and where to go.

During the next 65 hours of confinement, Woolley’s iPhone turned out to be a crucial aid. Thanks to the iPhone first-aid app he’d downloaded, he figured out how to fashion a bandage and tourniquet for his leg and to stop the bleeding from his head wound. The app also warned him not to fall asleep if he felt he was going into shock, so he set his cell phone’s alarm clock to go off every 20 minutes.

In a blog post from March of last year, Woolley himself described how he held himself together.

Somewhere between Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, my first night after the earthquake, I was trying to calm my spirit and align my heart with God’s heart. I knew worship would help, but I was having trouble getting my mind there, so I indulged in an hour of iPhone battery power and listened to worship songs, there in my broken elevator shaft

My Savior, My God by Aaron Shust was encouraging song for me that night:

“I am not skilled to understand what God has willed, what God has planned. I only know at His right hand stands One who is my Savior.”

The chorus is one of my favorite sing-at-the-top-of-your-lungs-in-the-car choruses

“My savior loves, my savior lives, my savior’s always there for me...

My God He was, my God He is, my God is always gonna be...”

Wooley continues: “The most significant thing that I experienced was my encounters with God. People can wonder, “Where is God when we suffer?” and “If I go through a crisis will He be there for me?” There are

difficult times when we don't feel God's presence. But in this experience, God was very present. I felt Him and heard his voice and I experienced Him in the midst of this crisis in a very personal way."

The L A Times reported the day of the rescue this way:

About 9 a.m. Friday, Virginia Task Force One, out of Fairfax County, pulled Haitian bellhop Mondesir Luckson from a crumbled elevator shaft in the upscale Montana Hotel in Port-au-Prince. Luckson drank some water, ate some food and talked about how he could hear other people trapped in the rubble. At first there were eight voices, he said, then there were only six.

An hour later, the search team hauled out American Daniel Woolley ... from another elevator shaft. Luckson ran to Woolley as he was being carried out on a stretcher, placed his hand on his cheek and introduced himself. "Hey Luckson!" Woolley said in a raspy voice. "Good to meet you, man! Let me get your address." Woolley was transported to a hospital at the U.S. Embassy and then evacuated to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami.

Luckson said the two of them talked constantly while entombed in the dark and the dust for nearly 65 hours, praying and urging each other not to get discouraged. "He is married and had two boys," Luckson said. "He kept saying, 'I just want to see my family and wife' " in Colorado. Luckson said he didn't know yet what had happened to his own family.

Today in this church, this place, this celebration of Jesus' resurrection, we wonder at what Mary Magdalene and the Other Mary saw and felt. We join with them in trying to take in the scene, to experience what had never been experienced before.

And in our wonder, we must also ask, what will we rely on when our world goes dark? When our foundations are shaken what tools will we have? What songs will we sing? And where will we go to find Jesus, our Risen Savior, who lives and loves and goes on ahead of us?

This month, our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori wrote in her Easter Message to the Church: "The gift of Easter insists that human beings are capable of divine relationship, for as St. Athanasius put it, "God became human that human beings might become divine." The life, death, passion, and resurrection of Jesus are the cosmic insistence that nothing can separate us from the divine passion for humanity. Easter people are imprinted with the assurance that God is always working some new grace of creation out of death and destruction."

Friends, Jesus Christ is risen, today. He goes before us, even in the darkest places. Our victory is assured. We need only to remember, wrapped in the wonder of God's unfailing love. *Amen.*

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