

“Holy Abandon”
Easter Sermon, Year A
Wheatley U.R.C.
20 April, 2014
Psalm 118:14-24
John 20:1-18
Colossians 3:1-4
Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen

Prayer:

Resurrecting power of God, move through this place with holy abandon, and stir up our hearts from their places of slumber. Make us fearless about what we might lose, and help us to claim the life that is fully alive when we leave behind all that binds us.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Across the past week, what thought, emotion, or situation have you wrestled with most? If you read the Bible passages for Holy Week—starting with Jesus’ triumphal ride into Jerusalem, then moving into his final dramatic days with his disciples—were there any recurrent thoughts or images for you?

For me, it was abandonment. It’s a painful, awful, complicated feeling, abandonment is—or, it can be. Full of silence and emptiness, often charged with fear, anger, confusion, desperation. For most of us, the idea of abandonment is not an easy or pleasant one. Nonetheless, across Lent and Holy Week, I realised that abandonment is part of daily experience: we abandon others, or they abandon us, in all sorts of ways; we abandon God; and we can feel like God has abandoned us.

At the beginning of Lent, I intended to fast each day from dawn until dusk. I’m persuaded of the growing national, moral crisis of hunger in Great Britain (to say nothing of global hunger) so I’d decided to join the End Hunger Fast campaign, sponsored by the Trussel Trust, which was designed to help raise awareness about the issue. I don’t know how many participated, but there was a website and resources to help adherents select from a variety of different suggested fasts that could be undertaken. Among them, they suggested the traditional Muslim fast as being a great challenge, but one that could be safely done without straining the digestive system.

So I took the challenge. The first couple of weeks were good. I learned quite a bit about myself. I thought a lot about those who regularly go without a meals: especially those who work long hours, and those who don’t work because they can’t find work—it occurred to me that they don’t have the distraction of work to take their mind off their hunger. And I thought about children who regularly go to school hungry. Each time I skipped a meal, or felt my stomach grumble, I would say prayers for those who are hungry all the time.

It was a nice feeling, that solidarity—though I was aware that mine was a position of privilege: I was *choosing* not to eat, and there were moments when I felt convicted by how much more I *could* do if I’d commit more time, money, effort, etc., to the moral

issues of inequity plaguing the planet. I had to remind my own conscience of divine grace in the midst of my sin-stricken state.

That was the first three weeks. At week four, I was wearing down with the struggle. I was increasingly aware that—although a dawn-to-dusk fast is not unhealthy from a digestive point of view—emotionally and relationally, a lack of blood-sugar balance for weeks on end can take a toll on the family. I felt terribly conflicted on that day toward the end of week 4 when I broke my fast early; I was abandoning my solidarity with the hungry.

By the end of week five, I had skipped only breakfast *or* lunch instead of both meals for many of the days. And in my last week, I had altered my Lenten fast simply to omit one meal each day.

I know that the hungry of the world will never know the difference, and they probably don't even care; why should they? And I don't believe that God was troubled by my decision on this score. But I was aware of the abandonment I had initiated—I had chosen to abandon my commitment, my fast, the mental and physical solidarity I had declared. It was a painful but important 'awakening' in my Lenten wilderness.¹

I reflected on how those who had intended to stick with Jesus might have felt on that fateful night and the days that followed his betrayal, sham trial, and crucifixion. I contemplated how often the Church, and so many of us in it, abandon our commitment to Jesus as he comes to us today in "the least of these"—the poor, the vulnerable, the forgotten disempowered ones—because we simply tire of it, or forget, or can't figure out how to answer that call, *and* our call to family and loved ones and all the other things we want to do.

The Holy Week lectionary passages that guided our reflection and spiritual journey with Jesus in his last week of life, seemed to me riddled by of images of abandonment: Jesus' desertion by the once-adoring throngs; before them, his closest friends took off. Next, innocent and arrested on trumped-up charges, Jesus was abandoned by the legal and political authorities.

But it wasn't only Jesus who was abandoned. His disciples must have felt that he abandoned them to some extent—or at least, their cause—when he didn't put up a fight under arrest.

His mother surely felt jettisoned. In Matthew's gospel, not long before they headed into Jerusalem for the Passover feast, Jesus says, "Who is my mother, and my brothers?" when she came looking for him. No doubt, those words rang in her ears for a long time. She had to watch as he was tortured, humiliated, and put to death. John's gospel says that Jesus, looking down at her from the cross, introduced "the disciple whom he loved" to her, saying "Woman, here is your son", and to the disciple, "Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27)—but still, *he* was leaving her, the woman who had already given up so much as his mother.

¹ 'Wilderness Awakenings': our 2014 Lenten theme at Wheatley URC.

Similarly, the disciples must have felt like Jesus had just given up on them, abandoned their cause, quit the fight.

At the climax of the Passion narrative, echoing the Psalmist (and every other abandoned person in the world), Jesus cries out in anguish, “My God, my God, why have *you* forsaken me?!” (Matthew 27:46) before breathing his last.

Turning to this morning’s gospel text, Mary Magdalene surely felt abandoned by everyone and everything: by Jesus, the authorities, God, her fellow disciples—who, even after she’d gone to retrieve them and bring them to the tomb with her, left her and went back home when they found the tomb empty.

Her own wits abandoned her. She was completely bereft. Empty of all ability to trust, interpret, or absorb everything that had just taken place. Why didn’t she *notice* that they were angels sitting there in the tomb—didn’t she realize that they weren’t ordinary men? And, given her devotion to Jesus, how could she not have recognized the man she first mistook for the gardener?

This was not a moment where anything made sense—at least, not any sense that the world understands or grasps. Mary Magdalene was trying to come to grips with it, though . . . she was trying to get a handle on the resurrection, which defied and confounded every bit of experience and reasonable sense she had ever known. But Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17).

Wait, was this for real—was it a vision, or was he really there? Which begs another question: are visions delusions, or are they part of reality?²

In the final Harry Potter book, in a desperate hour, Harry’s friend and tutor, Prof. Dumbledore, who died a few years before, appears by surprise and talks with him for a long time. They’re in a train station, though how they got there Harry doesn’t know.

In the parting scene, Harry turns to Dumbledore and says,

*“Tell me one last thing. . . . Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”
Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry’s ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.*

“Of course it’s happening inside your head Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it’s not real?”³

Three days ago, a Nobel Prize-winning writer from Columbia named Gabriel Garcia Marquez died. Both Giles Fraser, and American writer and ordained minister Nancy Rockwell, made similar observations about Marquez’s work, and the ways in which it helps to elucidate the Christian truth of Easter.

² Nancy Rockwell <http://biteintheapple.com/easter-vision/> wrote an outstanding Easter reflection that included this particular ‘take’ on the Easter story, and I am indebted to her for the shape and ideas that this portion of my sermon develops.

³ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 579.

His best-selling book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, says Rockwell, “introduced the west to the magical/realism thinking of Latin America, in which physical reality and spiritual experience intermingle in ordinary days.”⁴

“Interestingly,” Fraser writes, “Gabo, as he was affectionately known, always denied his work was ‘magical’. He saw himself as a realist through and through. And Gabo's left-wing political sympathies, his friendship with Fidel Castro and so on, point to a seriousness of purpose that is not usually associated with the literature of fantasy.”⁵

“[Marquez] said in an interview in the *Paris Review*, ‘It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my book comes for the imagination, while the truth is that there’s not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality. The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination.’”

“And,” Rockwell points out, “so does Easter. Who but Jesus had such imagination for life? Earning big praise for thousands of years (every Easter is a standing ovation, how he boggles our minds!), Jesus walks between the clarity of belief and the shadow world of imagination, showing us that life is not defined by Caesar’s reign, Pilate’s grasp [or any sort of imperial or political power], conventional pieties, corporate rules, public approval, or what your mother said. Jesus colours outside all those lines, showing life that cannot be seen within them.”⁶

“It looks magical,” says Fraser “– the return of a dead man to life – but it’s not treated that way by those who follow the story. And it is post-colonial, even perhaps the foundational literature of post-colonialism – for if the cross is anything, it is the repressive power of colonial authority. The risen Christ [is] the supreme act of defiance against the power of Roman imperial rule. Nothing can contain the imagination. We can all be free. There is hope. It begins with an act of the defiant imagination, something that cannot be constrained by the logic of grim political inevitability. But it is also deadly realistic.”⁷

Friends—people of faith; people with doubts; you who feel firmly grounded in a world that conforms to certain routines, rules, natural laws; and you who have experienced how reality is not always able to be neatly defined, ordered, or contained: what does Easter mean for you?

What was John telling us, and what did Jesus mean when he said to Mary, “Do not hold onto 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.’ 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.” (John 20:17-18)

The good news is that Jesus was redeeming even the experience of abandonment: he was entreating Mary to abandon—to completely renounce—her pre-conceived notions

4 Nancy Rockwell, <http://biteintheapple.com/easter-vision/>

5 Giles Fraser, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/18/gabriel-garcia-marquez-imagination-genius>

6 Nancy Rockwell, <http://biteintheapple.com/easter-vision/>

7 Giles Fraser, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/18/gabriel-garcia-marquez-imagination-genius>

regarding who or what Jesus was about; to let go of everything that constrained her ability to engage with a God who doesn't obey human understanding.

What the resurrection demonstrated in the most powerful way possible is that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God NEVER abandons us. Even in our darkest hour, in the deepest pit of our personal hell—when we cannot hear or see or sense that presence in any way—God is nonetheless with us and at work ahead of us, preparing to meet us and accompany us into the new life awaiting us.

What Jesus realized, but what his disciples to this day struggle to comprehend, is that God's ways are far above and beyond our ability to fathom, describe, or predict; and every time we start trying to define or describe or predict what God will do based on the world's definitions of what is 'real' or rational or reasonable, we've begun to pile up the stones that trap and entomb us.

Jesus knew that he was living out of and back into God's own life. And because God holds all power and dominion over death as well as life, there was nothing that could hold Jesus back—not betrayal, not torture, not abandonment, not even the grave, or a dear friend's ideas about who he was and is.

The point is, Easter draws us into a holy abandonment of everything in this world that holds us back, that ties us down, that inhibits our imagination, or stifles our ability to understand and believe that, with God, anything is possible. And *that's* what is real.

The question that remains is: Are we ready to let go . . . to live with Christ-like abandon?