

John 20:1-18

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. ²So 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." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around

and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[b] "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

March 27, 2016

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

For my 45th birthday, my teenage son gave me a book. That's not a surprise. I love books. The book he picked out for me was "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying" – a spiritual classic – a primer on Buddhism for the Western mind. (Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002 edition) We had been having great conversations about some of the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, so it came as a welcome addition to my library. However, I chose to wait and start reading it on the plane when Chuck and I took our parents' get-away trip to Iceland in February.

It was in reading the first few pages that I realized that my son had given me a book on how to meditate on death for my 45th birthday – a bit premature I might think – and perhaps not the best reading for flying over nothing but ocean and icebergs! And yet, the book has been comforting, connecting, and actually a good way into exploring my own faith's understanding about life and death, and even more importantly for today – for thinking about how life continues after death!

You see, that's one of the basic questions every religion is required to ask of itself. In addition to helping people make meaning out of life, a religion is supposed to help you make sense of or at least make peace with - death. I'm not sure we, in the Christian tradition, or maybe in the modernized, first world, Western civilizations in general have done our job in that regard. Sadly in our society, the only people who seem to want to talk to me about the possibility of my own death are the people who sell insurance. They want to make sure that my money is well invested with their company should I experience my untimely demise. It's all for the comfort and

peace of mind for my beneficiaries they tell me. But that's not really what would prepare my loved ones for the grief they would face, is it? I dare say that Christianity in general has done the same thing with its marketing plan – sold itself more like an insurance policy than helping folks do much real preparation for death. Christianity is sold as the ultimate “get out of hell free” card when the stories of Christ's Passion have far more depth to them than just that!

I'm afraid we've grown soft on this question, back-pedaled it, skirted around it. It makes me cringe to think of how many Zombie-Jesus sermons are going to be preached today because Pastors don't really know what else to say, and they want to be trendy, and they really don't want to admit that they have deep-seated doubts lurking around in their own spiritual closets. It makes us uncomfortable to come starkly against the uncertainty of it all. We can't prove that life exists beyond death, so we find creative ways to avoid the question.

Not so in more eastern thought – and it helps to remember that Christianity was born out of eastern thought as well. Tibetan master Sogyal Rinpoche says in his book, “It has often intrigued me how some Buddhist masters I know ask one simple question of people who approach them for teaching: Do you believe in a life after this one?” and he adds, “They are not being asked whether they believe in it as a philosophical proposition, but whether they feel it deeply in their heart. The master knows that if people believe in a life after this one, their whole outlook on life will be different, and they will have a distinct sense of personal responsibility and morality. What the masters must suspect is that there is a danger that people who have no strong belief in a life after this one will create a society fixated on short-term results, without much thought for the consequences of their actions.” And then he asks the question, “Could this be the major reason why we have created a brutal world like the one in which we are now living, a world with little real compassion?”

What a question! Could it be that we don't believe deeply enough in life to think that it continues beyond our own deaths? What kind of world then are we bequeathing to our children and grandchildren whose lives continue beyond our own?

The risen Christ poses the same kind of question to us as our spiritual master, "Do you believe in eternal life?" It's all through his discourse with Nicodemus earlier in the 3rd chapter of the book of John. Are we willing to learn about spiritual re-birth? Are we on the course to believing in things that we cannot fully know through logic or reason? That belief helps us understand that our mortality is not the end of the world – though it may be the end of the world AS WE KNOW IT. The first step to contemplating death somewhere other than your insurance agent's office is to recognize that you are in an ever-flowing stream of life where people come, and people go, but the river keeps on moving. Saints and angels keep coming back. We cross paths with amazing people, and they cross paths with us, and life continues.

It is striking to pay attention to the gospel accounts of the Resurrection rather than all the things that we've been taught to see in this story over the course of our own Christian upbringings. One thing really stood out for me this time through. The risen Lord is encountered as a stranger, as the gardener. This happens to the post-crucifixion Jesus a lot. Even his closest friends don't recognize him. Even Mary who knows him, maybe even the best, cannot quite see him for who he is until he speaks directly to her.

What does this information tell us about the afterlife? First of all, it tells us that even the closest disciples, who were trained in spiritual ways, who had seen Lazarus walk out of the tomb, were frightened of the possibility that Jesus could completely conquer death. He was telling them that all along, and it didn't quite sink in. But how could they really hear? It doesn't take a

scientific mind to realize that dead things don't come back to life. Even Mary couldn't fathom in her own imagination that it could really be Jesus standing right in front of her. Her own eyes had to readjust to see him for what he was.

And this death had obviously changed him. Jesus went through a transformation that rendered him unrecognizable to his closest friends. Death indeed is a stranger. It represents almost everything unknown to us. In fact, now that we have so much more information about earth and space and ocean – many of our final discoveries are to be found within. Brain science can only reveal so much, and the existence of life after death is perhaps our greatest mystery of all. Do you believe in it? Not philosophically, not with evidence or proof, not with projected metaphors of Dante's heaven and hell. No, do you believe that the ever-flowing stream of life goes on? Do you believe that life exists beyond your own? Do you trust in the spiritual understanding that God has more to offer than just this plane of existence? Jesus talked about those questions during his earthly life, and he made us all the more curious in coming back from the dead to speak to his disciples some more. But in life and in the afterlife, Jesus keeps making one thing clear – the Resurrection is a message of love and a promise to the future that love is what will bind us together. You will be known by this – followers of Jesus – if you have love for one another. Or you can picture Jesus' post-resurrection conversation with Peter on the beach – Do you love me? Then, feed my sheep.

It is our obligation as people of faith to prepare one another for death. And it's not gruesome, and it doesn't have to be uncomfortable or all insurance-y. It is about helping people to live so that their legacy stretches well beyond their years, that their love is made known, because they cannot, will not accept that death is the final end. The promise of heaven is really a promise for right here and right now. We live well so that we might rest in peace. Yes, the risen

Christ is still a stranger to us, but he is also made known in how we see the image of Christ and his love reflected in one another, and the love we share.

It is, after all, about taking life seriously, of being reminded that our time here is precious, and beloved by God. Rinpoche reminds his readers that peace of mind will come from remembering to find a deeper spiritual meaning to life, and he encourages his readers, as Jesus has always encouraged us, to live the holy and inspired life NOW, not wait until death is impending to consider whether or not we've done what God has given us in this life to do.

Do you believe in a life after this one? I do. I pray that in your heart you do too. Amen.