

What God in Christ Assumed: Our Hope

I Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

<http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=45482>

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Prior to the eighth century, there was a school of iconography that forbid depicting Jesus' death or Christ's resurrection. If hanging on the cross, Jesus was always painted alive, his head not slumped, his eyes still open; and if the subject were the resurrection, the paintings, like the Gospels themselves, offered no direct view but images of “women coming with spices, or the bowled-over guards or the angel or at most a burst of light from the open tomb” [Robert Jenson]. Believing the actual moment of Jesus' rising had been redacted not only by the Gospel writers and his fellow artists, but by Almighty God himself, Henry Ossawa Tanner paints “The Three Marys,” marking Christ's rising through the experience of these women as they approach the empty tomb. The brush strokes of Tanner's signature deep blue sky are behind them; ahead, pure light is coming toward them, reflecting off their weary bodies, illumining their astonished faces.

Luke tells us that the women initially were perplexed, and perhaps Tanner's Mary Magdalene, on the left, is just that: her hand touching her face the way we touch our faces when we wonder if we are really inhabiting time and space, her arm reaching back for, but missing, the assurance of a companion's hand. This Mary's mind cannot make sense of what she sees, except that her expression and her leaning forward suggest to me she is perplexed because she wonders if what she sees is too good to be true.

To tell you the truth, (and why shouldn't I on this last Easter Sunday when I can!), I have been this Mary most of my life. I say to you, “He is risen!” and you say back to me, “He is risen indeed!” and I wonder, my hand on my face, my body leaning forward, “Could this great good news really be true?” This is to say, I have done most of my believing in the subjunctive mood, “the mood of mystery...of faith interwoven with doubt. It's a held breath, a hand reaching out...” writes essayist Michele Morano. I think of Mary's response to Gabriel's annunciation: “How could this be?” I think of Mary Magdalene's response to the sound of Jesus' voice in John's Gospel: “Rabbouni?!” Could he really be alive?

On the other hand, it was the indicative mood (along with a bit of bias against women) that led the disciples, at this point in Luke's story, to say the witness of the women was an “idle tale and they did not believe them.” The indicative mood “is for knowledge, facts, absolutes, for describing what's real or definite.” This mood “cannot get past the hopeless finality of the crucifixion,” Ted Wardlaw writes, and so, in every age, is “eager to subvert resurrection faith with premature certainties about the way things are.” Wardlaw guesses that the dominance of the indicative mood among the disciples is why Luke's story of the resurrection is “peppered with the word *but*... [I]n only 12 verses, that defiant conjunction *but* shows up six times. It's as if Luke is grabbing us by the lapels...and forcing us to understand that no matter what we've heard, we haven't heard the whole story yet.” Be that as it may (subjunctive mood!), I am guessing Luke had Mary Magdalene at his first “*but*”: “On the sabbath day they rested, according to the commandment. *But* on the first day of the week, at early dawn...” See how her eyes are fixed on the stone rolled away. “*But what if,*” she must be wondering, “*what if* death and the grave were not our destiny? *What if* Jesus were indeed alive?” He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Next consider the middle Mary who, according to one translation, came to the tomb with the other Marys not at early dawn but “at deep dawn...that indefinable time,” Presbyterian poet and preacher James Lawry writes, “between darkness and light.../that time when the promise in which you believe/is true;/or the promise in which you believe/is a lie./If everything you believe in is true,” Lawry goes on, “then there is hope./If everything you believe in is a lie,/then there is no hope.

The middle Mary in Luke's Gospel is not Mary but Joanna, wife of Herod's steward Chuza. Forgive me, but what comes to mind, the genders switched, is the complicated marriage of Kelly Ann and George Conway! From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, this wife of Herod's steward had provided for Jesus and the disciples out of her husband's resources. This Mary is literally in the middle. So too was Tanner's wife Jessie Olson, a white opera singer from San Francisco who modeled for the middle Mary. She and Tanner surely lived between

two worlds as Joanna did: the black painter and the white singer, an interracial couple enduring the racism of Philadelphia and fleeing to Paris.

I imagine the middle Mary nee Joanna woke at deep dawn believing Jesus' promise and her hope for God's kingdom come was as good as a lie. Maybe on the way to the tomb she said to the other Marys, as the two disciples will say to a stranger later that day, on the road to Emmaus, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Now she has only Herod's world. Her hope for this life is all that remains. Her end is the grave.

Tanner paints her on the boundary that is deep dawn, the split second when she sees the stone rolled away. More richly dressed than Mary Magdalene, wed through her husband to present power arrangements, I see her stopped in her tracks on the line between daylight and darkness. Her face is frozen, her hands are suspended in midair; her fingers half-closing and half-opening; the space between them empty. Compared to Mary Magdalene, she has come to a full stop, almost as if immobilized between the light before her and the darkness behind her. Amazed or aghast?

Is this not how we also wake on Easter morning? "Deep dawn, for example," the poet continues, "is that moment/just after the doctor comes in and says/it's cancer.../and then says/these are the things she can do;/but she can make no promises./At that moment,/everything you have been taught to believe about hope/is true or/it is a lie.../either you believe there is hope/or you believe there is nothing but disease./Deep dawn/is that moment/just after you hang up the phone/and you...go to the police station/to pick up your son or your daughter./At that moment,/you believe there is hope for a new beginning/...or you believe there is nothing/but angry rebellion.../Deep dawn/that moment just after the news is bad/like when one parent comes home and says to the other/I don't love you any more.../or when someone says/I am powerless over my addiction/or when the boss says/your job has been phased out...."

At deep dawn, Mary in the middle nee Joanna stands her ground, which is really no ground at all, between hope and no hope, between truth and lie, between life and death, between the deep blue darkness behind her and the blinding light ahead. To be sure, she could still have left the eleven and returned to life in Herod's household, to the security of a roof over her head, a steady income, a husband who may or may not love her because he loves living close to power more. And to be sure, on Easter afternoon, like the disciples trudging toward Emmaus, we can and often do return to dwell in the darkness behind us. But in the deep dawn of this morning, Luke tells us that even Joanna went into the tomb. No doubt she entered still expecting to see the triumph of death over the life of one she had loved. Instead death was nowhere to be found.

An empty tomb, of course, is ambiguous at best. In this sense, the eleven were right to say the report of the women was an idle tale, for as yet none of them had been encountered by the risen Lord. Still, the empty tomb is our first hint that we may hope for a future that is in the hand of the God whose love never quits and not in the hands of death. A missing body is God's earnest that Christ is alive and active in human history, destroying every ruler and authority and power, death being the last enemy. Still, to be given that hint, that hope, that future, we must enter the tomb where even the death in us will be defeated by love. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Finally, consider the third Mary, the Mary who hangs back, who is in the shadows even as the light embraces her. She is Mary the mother of James whom we meet for the first time here in Luke's Gospel, a latecomer, like we are, to this story. Behind her we can only imagine the "other women" Luke mentions, all of them eavesdroppers on the story more than actors. Like we are. Her eyes appear to me to be fixed on the first witnesses rather than the empty tomb. The angle of her body suggests she might be steadying herself on the one who is going before her. In other reproductions, she is the only one who could be said to look a little terrified. Or maybe I just imagine this because Luke reports that "The women were terrified" when, a moment after this moment, two men appear beside them in dazzling clothes.

Like good exegetes, the men interpret the meaning of the empty tomb with a question, a promise, and a command: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" "He is not here, *but* has risen." "Remember how he told you in Galilee that the son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." This is enough to send the three Marys running to the disciples. This must be enough for us too. The words and the witnesses are all any of us have. With the moment of Jesus' rising redacted and no sightings of the risen Lord until he comes again, the evidence of his rising is his love that lives in us. Therefore we hope in him not only for this life *but* for the life to come.

"He is risen! He is risen indeed!" Alleluia. Amen.