

Rev Wm Blake Spencer

John 20: 19-31/1 Peter 1:3-9

And there was morning and there was evening, the end of the first, third day. Easter evening. Evening moving into a tide of days....a season...those days and weeks following the events of Easter morning. On the verge of Eastertide we go back upstairs where the disciples remain.

Even though in John's Gospel... news of empty tomb and risen Christ have been discovered and shared...there remains numbness as the disciples continue to huddle in the room where Jesus broke bread and poured wine and washed feet and spoke words that believers would speak from one generation to the next.

In this chapter of the gospel story it is as if all is in slow motion...each frame of this living story clicking forward at a snail's pace....the plot continues but the disciples loaded down by so much story they can not take it all in.

It's what happens when grief hits....like trying to move through heavy, steamy, wet, humidity. Simple things become a burden so we don't bother. We sit where we are because nothing in the moment matters. We have a hard time sorting out all the events. Time and day get lost.

In grief the disciples stay put....as they cling to every possible molecule of grace left in that room. Hanging on to what was, they struggle to take in what is. This scene is in the category of, "if we don't say it then it's not a real"if we "don't move from where we are, then we won't have to deal with what is". So..... sit in the room they do unwilling to let go just yet.

In John's gospel the morning garden run and celebration of Easter life has already taken place. Simon Peter and the "other" disciple...the one Jesus had come to love.... as John writes it...ran full blast to see with their own eyes what the women had reported.

But the others didn't budge. Andrew, Matthew, Philip, Nathaniel, Bartholomew, the James', and Thomas.....they're stuck as evening on that first Easter comes. Empty tomb and women's news don't seem to break through. In their minds the moment for justice and new beginnings had already come and gone.

They didn't doubt the love they had shared with Jesus...nor could they shrug off the words he spoke...the invaluable words of wisdom and compassion. All the stories kept running through their minds....Lazarus claimed by the stench of death walks out of the tomb with new life, the woman about to be stoned gets up at Jesus' invitation and walks away filled with grace,

the blind man whose eye's had been touched with healing went away not only with sight but insight. The stories kept racing through their minds.

But what were they supposed to do with it all now? What was the point of all that following. This is the nagging question that will let up.

This doesn't seem to be the logical progression for the Easter story. On this Sunday after Easter....haven't we already blown the repentance, doubt and grief out of the sanctuary walls like a muffler of a car that hasn't been driven in months?

Do you know what I'm talking about? We used to take my grandmother's Oldsmobile Bonneville for a drive occasionally. It was a tank of a car....with a trunk the size of an efficiency apartment.

Our job was to get it out on the highway and push the pedal to the metal. It seems a car needs a good gunning every now and then....especially if it is driven day after day at

slow speeds. It was a fun job. Push the pedal and wait for that moment when the black smoke pops out of the muffler with a bang.

Easter is that moment....when we turn up the volume and let the joy flow. The organ pipes and alleluias have already shouted the resurrection news! We've busted out of the season of repentance having had every seat in the place full. So why does it feel like Easter is over....like it never happened?

Why do we find ourselves back in the room with the disciples again.....emotionally stuck....asking questions, doubting....and in grief?

How many times do we have to encounter the dullness and slowness of the disciple's and for that matter our own inabilities to grasp it all.

Maybe we should ask who it is telling the story in John's gospel. Because the way the story unfolds doesn't seem to hold up to the standards many in the church have come to expect. This Sunday after Easter shouldn't be muddled up with stammering disciples.

We have all the basic components of the story....creation, covenant, prophecy....birth, ministry, death, resurrection. We prefer to move through each scene with efficiency and purpose....and through the year's cliff note versions of the story have been published with rock solid perspectives leaving little room for doubt.

This is the way it was. This is the way it is. And that's that. We were sad now we're happy. We were lost now we're found. Simple, efficient, effective storytelling and faith living....that's what many in the church expect and proclaim....leaving no room to mull around with emotion and questions.

Douglass Adams has a very helpful way of understanding the story telling techniques of the Bible. He suggests "biblical stories are like grandparent stories. Jesus, Paul, and the Hebrew scriptures tell stories that include rough edges- unethical or ambiguous characters, unresolved or surprising endings- and so we laugh and know that we and others may live through the rough times in our lives, too. "

When we idealize stories and make them pristine, and perfect we are not only being unrealistic....we are not being truthful. Adams goes on to say grandparent stories more often reveal the bigger truths sitting in the room like a big elephant. He uses this story of a young boy to illustrate his point:

In the second grade, he played baseball with the Pee Wee League. His next door neighbor was the coach. This little boy was fascinated by a stopwatch the coach carried to time plays; and he saw a lot of that stopwatch, because....he was usually next to the coach on the bench. After practice, the coach and his wife often invited the team into their home to eat ice cream.

On one of these occasions, the coach and his wife were called away and asked the little boy to lock up the house when the others had gone. After finishing off the ice cream...he noticed the stopwatch on the dining room table, so he went over, picked it up, and began pushing the buttons. The dials went round and round. Then it was time to leave, so he put the stopwatch in his pocket and went home...

The little boy kept the watch in his pocket all week long until the base ball game on Saturday; then in the midst of a big play, he pulled it out of his pocket *to time the action*. Sitting right next to the coach, he was exposed as a thief.

That night, the father called the boy in for a talk....He began by saying, "Son, you have ruined your life!" (The boy was only in the second grade, but we parents can give the impression that once you fail your life is at end.) He went on to say, "You might be forgiven once; but if you ever steal again, you will be branded a thief for life. Then you

will never be the doctor or lawyer I hoped you would be.....the then father turned to the grandfather and said, "You tell the boy how serious this is."

The grandfather leaned back and said, "Oh, it is pretty serious. Of course, it could have been worse,

like the time your father stole the Johnson's boat up at the lake. It took me two days to get him out of jail.

Or there was that time your father and his friends were graduating high school and rented a cottage on the edge of town; they all got drunk, wrecked the place, and landed in jail again.

And the third time your father was in jail...." The father interrupted, saying, "I think we have talked enough about this."

You see..... even the Easter story is a grandparent story.....we encounter good news....but not without the truth of doubt and worry and confusion and grief.....and time to get through it all.

Thomas does not buy the story until he sees....not only the risen Christ...but the wounds....the marks that prove this risen Christ was the one who had called him to follow.

These huddled disciples in the room on Easter evening give us hope. When we fail to trust what we are hearing and seeing....when we can't break out of the grief we are sinking in long enough to encounter good news then we have the tendency to give in and give up and not budge from where we are.

The reaction of the disciples give us hope....for we are just like them and they are just like us. Sometimes we get stuck in emotion and we can't see the way.

The Easter story is miraculous...but it is also very, very human. It is a grandparent's story....whereby God in the risen Christ loves us until we get it. God knows it takes time for some of us to get it....

it takes time to get through grief....it takes time to get past anger....it takes time to move out of numbness....it takes time for us to ask all our questions and to seek proof.....so God waits with love.... until we get it.

God appears before us again and again with grace and mercy....until we get it. God does not give up. God perseveres.

I can't tell you how many times I've read today's passage. I certainly don't tell you this to impress you... only to share with you that no matter how many times a part of God's story is read or told....there is always something to encounter....always something to surprise....always something to open us in a new way.

On this reading of John's 20th chapter I was amazed by verse 30 which reads...."Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book."

Oh my imagination is soaring. Eastertide is much more than one story... it's a collection of stories....stories we can read in black and white in this book we call the Bible and stories that were not written down....and stories that are continuing to happen.

God is not contained by this book we call holy.....God has done much more than these pages can tell.....and God continues to peel away grace upon grace....waiting.....longing and love you and me until we encounter Easter right where we are....until Easter is finally the last words of the story.

And there was morning and there was evening, the end of the first, third day. Easter evening. Evening moving into a tide of days....a season...those days and weeks following the events of Easter morning. My friends we are in Eastertide....and God's Easter story continues to come alive.