

April 24, 2011: EVERLASTING LOVE
Matthew 28:1-10; Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
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The problem with the Easter story is that everyone thinks they know it. I'm pretty sure there is nothing new I can say about Easter that hasn't already been said sometime in the last 2,000 years. But I'm also pretty sure that isn't why people come to church on this day of all days—to hear something new. Most of us come to hear the familiar story, the one we are dying, not just to *hear*, but to *know*. The part where death doesn't have the last word, that (in fact) we've been given a second chance, that there is an inexhaustible supply of second chances. So then, what's with Jeremiah today? Jeremiah, written to a nation first split by civil war and governmental duplicity, then invaded by the Evil Empire, the populace driven to cowering in the capitol, because that's the one, impregnable place, then besieged and starved for 2 years before being brutally over-run, now apparently abandoned by God. The city is destroyed, the king, his family, and the court are publicly tortured and hauled off to the ancient world's Gitmo. And Jeremiah has the gall and temerity to say from God, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." Right. These people have had decades of reasons to believe the whole world has fallen apart, that there are no second chances, that death wins.

Kind of like us. Environmental disasters, bigger power doing hostile take-overs of weaker ones, economic implosion, vast portions of the population unable to feed and support themselves, teens sold into the sex trade or shot in the streets, mob rule, crumbling infrastructure, useless social institutions. And that's just in the US. Think of Japan, where the land buckles under one's feet and the ocean or nuclear disaster wipes out everything else. Or Africa, where AIDS has destroyed an entire generation and dictators are overthrown for what is yet unknown. Into that, Jeremiah interjects God's assurance, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." And then promises singing, dancing, partying, agricultural abundance, and ecstatic pilgrimage to the very place that has just been crumbled around our ears. This is a "second chance" of epic proportions. Perfect for the Easter story everyone already knows. If only we could believe it.

To hear Matthew tell it, things begin quietly enough—before dawn in a hushed garden—but there quickly develops such urgency, suddenness, haste, and speed that big, tough soldiers faint from fear. That earthquake, by the way, is not what rolls the stone back. The tomb is already empty (God only knows where the body went!). The quake is what happens when the angel crackles and bangs into the third dimension of earth. You remember angels. Angels show up at the birth of the Guy Who Died, they show up when he's in a showdown with Satan, and here they are again. Suddenly everyone's a messenger, delivering the goods and sending people off, running back and forth, not to mention a multiplicity of "Do not be afraid." This isn't about natural events; this is about God. God wins. Even when it looks as if the best-lived life ever in the history of the world has been snuffed out for the sake of protecting religious self-righteousness and political stability. Death does not get the final word.

Remember Jeremiah? "I have loved you with an everlasting love." This means even the most mindless cruelty, the sleaziest power play, the greasiest take-over does not have the final word. God does. There will, once again, be dancing in the streets and singing to high heavens and pilgrimage to the holiest place in our world. Because God has loved us with an *everlasting* love and raised the One thoroughly and completely dead, brought him back to life. Because Life from the hand of God cannot be overcome. This is *hope*, friends. Hope, not in the sense of

“everything is gonna be OK, you’ll see, things will work out.” This is epic-proportion hope, certainty that, in the end, things will have a victorious *meaning*, no matter how they turn out.¹ “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” As in, there is nothing you can do to earn God’s love, there is nothing you can do to make God stop loving you. Everlasting. Live or die, God’s love for you will not stop.

Matthew is the gospel that tells the story of Jesus’ life in terms of “as it is written.” Every story Matthew tells, every sign and miracle, is some prophecy fulfilled. “As it is written,” he writes over and over. On Easter morning, for once, Matthew doesn’t say “as it is written.” This is a brand new development. No one could have guessed what was no longer in the tomb, who the two Marys would run into. This is more hope than we can handle. This is *everything has a victorious meaning* hope. This is *turning out* beyond our imaginations.

Given all of Matthew’s “as it is written,” the logical question would be, “What changed?” Look at the world unraveling around us! What could possibly change all of that? “What changed?” is the wrong question. The question oughta be “*Who* changed?” This is not a story of the world changing, the unraveled re-knit, natural laws being circumvented. This is a story of ordinary men and women—disciples, hangers on, street punks, teachers, retired folks, food stamp recipients, volunteers at the Food Bank, computer geeks, kids on the bus and off the bus, even pastors. This is a story of ordinary people like us, changed. Not because “as it is written,” but because God’s love *is* everlasting.

No one knows what happened in the tomb. Or when it happened. This was not a matter of resuscitation—Jesus going back to his normal, physical existence after an interruption of three days in the tomb. This is not cryogenic freezing to minus 450 degrees Fahrenheit and science figuring out a way to defrost and add breath. This is *resurrection*, a totally different kind of existence, *nothing* like “It is written.” We don’t know what happened. For once in Jesus’ life, there were no eye witnesses to what went on between him and God. Even the angel appears after the fact. Jesus’ closest friends were sleeping in that morning. It had been a hellacious weekend, and they just needed some rest before heading back home. Two lone women—probably up half the night anyhow, after the manner of women—two women show up to see if there are any final and appropriate things they can do to put the body to a respectful rest. After hearing the angel’s message they do the only rational thing a person can do under such circumstances. They turn tail and run. They run so fast—joyful, terrified, breathless, hopeful, fearful—they run smack into Jesus and fall at his feet. Zero to sixty in three seconds. The whole story of Easter morning could not have taken more than ten minutes, earthquake to the last “Go tell.”

That’s it. Jeremiah is Biblish for what happens Easter morning, a shorter way of saying what took Jesus a whole life and death and resurrection to say. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, know for a fact, know for yourself, know for the rest of the world, know for today and for the rest of your week and every week thereafter—*know* that God has loved us with an everlasting love and always will. And that’s the truth.

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¹ Richard Rohr, online meditation 4/23/11, from *Wondrous Encounters for Lent*, pp 141-143.