

# “In All the New, Familiar Places”

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Early, early in the morning, the women had no answers. It seemed like yesterday all over again. It even seemed like the night before that. Their darkness had not lifted. The sound of the earthquake still reverberated in their bones. They could not shake Jesus’s cries from the cross. Carrying layers of grief, even their questions were unclear.

The women entered the garden, dragging their feet as though they were stones. They were disbelieving, in shock at the green earth, the morning dew, the color, the life reaching toward the sun. Still, they were shattered. Each thought collided with another.

They felt as though they were back at the beginning – trying to stand upright, picking up the broken pieces in their lives . . . starting over. If they could only hear his voice one more time, get a word about what to do next. The closer they got to the tomb to tend to Jesus’ body, the more their grief engulfed them.

Maybe they could seek comfort in the shadows. In the shadows, nothing was certain. They could rush madly into the world without respect for who they were now and had always planned to be – followers of Jesus. Or they could try to forget what the last months and years had meant to them and indulge every diversion and every fancy that came to mind, living for the moment they possessed.

Even in their fear, the women remembered that they were called to love. Deep in their hearts they knew that *how* they loved was the only thing that would give their lives any meaning at all, any substance. Jesus had taught them that love is service. Love is justice. Love is grace and forgiveness. Love is living in the world for others.

Love is . . . resurrection

When it comes.

We hold in our hands the darkness and the light, the grief and blessings, the fear and the confidence. So much is true all at once – the moments we seize and those we let slip through our fingers, the painful losses and the carefully tended memories, the times we disappoint others and the times when we are able to “rise to the occasion” and do what we believe is the right thing to do.

Like some of you, I was privileged to hear Kate Bowler at Baylor last month. She is an Associate Professor of American Religion at Duke Divinity School . . . with friends at Lake Shore. She was in Waco to talk about her book *Everything Happens for a Reason . . . and Other Lies I've Loved* that she wrote after being diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer at the age of 35. This is the line I triply underlined in her book: “Life is so beautiful, life is so hard.” “Life is so beautiful, life is so hard.” “Life is so beautiful, life is so hard.”

She said, “I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful *and* terrible, the gorgeous *and* the tragic,” she said. “Except that I am beginning to believe that these opposites do *not* cancel each other out. . . . I think the same thoughts again and again. Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”

Her words made me think of a story that Rowan Williams experienced when he was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Once, in Sudan, he saw that “life is never just one thing.” He witnessed hunger, poverty, trauma, and brutality. “This, surely, was a world untouched by Easter,” he said.

Williams continued: “Growing up [in the Church of England] I was taught that you should never under any circumstances say ‘Alleluia’ during Lent. Save it till Easter; then you’ll really enjoy it as it was meant to be enjoyed. Every year we need to live for a little while in such a way that Easter comes as a massive surprise.”

But in Sudanese worship he discovered the unexpected: no occasion is free from “alleluias.” “Alleluia” said the women and children greeting him. “Alleluia” proclaimed every preacher at the microphone. “Alleluia” the worshipers sang. Lent it may have been, but to his ears, it was Easter, too.

“What if, like the Sudanese believers, we had lived so long with abandonment and terror and pain that you can never forget or ignore it?” Williams asked. Could we still say “alleluia”? The faithful people of Sudan had

come through everything with their confidence in tact that God was always with them through all they had endured and would endure. Even if the world forgot them, God would not forget. Because God is alive, they could live, too. What else to say but “alleluia”?

Matthew doesn't record any words the women spoke, but he does record what the angel said when he saw their fear.

“He is not here, he is risen” and then words that fulfilled a promise: “Behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

The angel's words evoked a resounding “Alleluia” in the women's hearts. The searing pain and fear gave way to great joy!

When everything was eerily unfamiliar, they heard a familiar word that brought them comfort.

Galilee.

Galilee, they knew. Galilee, Jesus knew. Galilee was home. Their old stomping ground. The place where they had first known Jesus. Everything would be all right. Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he had said he would. And they were going to get to see him in Galilee. Why had they doubted?

In his commentary on Matthew, Tom Long writes of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary that “without even knowing that they had crossed the border [from old life to new life]; they left the old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, and peace has little chance, and the rich get richer, and the weak all eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another, and people hatch murderous plots, and dead people stay dead . . . and they entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life.”

It's what we want, too, when we are shocked or saddened by news. We want anything that will help us make sense out of life that has all-too-quickly turned a familiar world into a chaotic, painful one . . . of life that has turned out to be different than what we had hoped. We want to wake up from what feels like a bad dream and have everything be like it was. In these times of searching for God, we are kindred spirits to the psalmist who must have first wondered:

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is  
as light to you. (from Psalm 139)*

Galilee is the place from which the disciples and the women came – their home turf, the place of their daily routine – where the olive groves, the lake thick with fishing boats, and the names and places of people were familiar. The place had meaning for Jesus' followers – not only for its geography but because it was home to familiar people made new – a centurion, a paralytic let down through the roof, a woman with an alabaster bottle of perfume, Jairus' sick daughter, a demon-possessed man, a boy with barley loaves and fishes. All had known the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

Galilee was where their lives were transformed.

Many of you know Helen Harris, who is on the faculty of the Baylor School of Social Work. She came to talk with our Care Group leaders one time and offered us what was probably the best single hour of pastoral ministry teaching I've ever heard. One thing she reminded us is that every encounter with a person in a hospital is different. There are broad strokes about ministering to people in different situations, no one visit will ever be like another because no one person or illness or family configuration is like another. So we wonder – and sometimes worry – about how we will respond.

"As I'm walking down the hall at the hospital," Helen told us, "I always pray: Lord, I haven't been here before. But you are going with me. And you are already there."

Walking into our Galilees with Jesus brings life, not death; communion, not separation. Helen's prayer reminds me that within my own power I can't make much of a difference for but I have confidence I can Christ is there.

In Galilee, alongside Jesus, where we keep practicing resurrection, sometimes we are competent and caring, sometimes blundering, and always dependent on the grace of Jesus Christ to lead us on.

What Christ was before – in the old, familiar places – he is now – and so much more -- as resurrected Lord. What he was to those disciples who flanked his side and bent his ear and hung on his words and balked at his commandments and felt pain at his death and joy at his resurrection – what he was then, he is to them now in transforming and life-giving ways.

This is the good news – that through Christ the most desperate places within us can be transformed into new ones. As Jesus said to the angel – and as the angel said to the women – and as the women said to the disciples – and the disciples to the gospel writers – and the gospel writers to us: “He is going to Galilee.” Galilee – the starting place and the starting over place. Galilee – the site of ministries remembered and ministries envisioned.

When all that is familiar, all that gives us security, all that we can count on is gone, our hearts can be opened for new possibilities of his presence like never before. As 94-year-old Jimmy Carter wrote in his new book, “Plunge into the future with faith.” It is never too late.

To be sure, we do things differently in the light of the Resurrection. We share a cup together and break a common loaf and remember the things Jesus commanded us to do. We meet once a week – sometimes more often – and sing and pray and with each other and listen to words from the Bible and ponder, sometimes struggle, what they mean to us. We teach our children. We baptize new believers as a sign of their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. We forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us. We are Christ’s witnesses. We are his proof. We are the evidence of his work. We are vessels of God’s hope on earth. By being here – in this new, familiar place – we show forth Christ’s life and death and the power of his resurrection. We can never be content to be our old, familiar selves again. The love of God renews and hallows all the new, familiar places.

Even when we are experiencing the hardest things, we can live our “Alleluias.” The only thing we cannot do is hold on to the Resurrected Christ. Instead, we must “let him take us where he is going . . . into the holy presence of Resurrection of the Lord, who is not behind us but ahead of us, every step of the way.”

This is the good news of the Resurrection!

Christ is Risen!

**Christ is Risen indeed!**