

“What I Learned Inside That Mystery”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Luke 24:1-12
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on April 21, 2019

Last year at this time I was alone on a walking trail. It was the first Easter of my life not to be at church. I was walking towards a cemetery that sits in the back corner of the grounds at *Lebh Shomea* House of Prayer retreat center. The sun was just beginning to come up. As I walked these words were playing on repeat in my head: “On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, they came to the tomb.”

On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, they came to the tomb. On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, they came to the tomb. That one line kept playing like a loop. I had never consciously memorized it, but the words were there, living in my memory, and I felt as if I were inside the story. I was, after all, walking to a cemetery. It was, after all, early dawn on Easter morning. I was, after all, deeply in grief.

The story of my Lenten season last year went something like this: Near the beginning of Lent I got the much-awaited phone call that there was a baby waiting for me at Hillcrest NICU—a little red-headed girl weighing a mere four pounds and in need of a foster mom. I spent nearly my whole day with her that first Saturday in the hospital, so grateful that for once my Sunday sermon was already fully written. The bond was instantaneous and strong. Everyone said she would need to be adopted; there was no one else to care for her. I will take her, my heart said. I will take her. I will keep her and love her for always.

I spent hours every day in the NICU learning how to feed Baby L and care for her and listen closely to her breathing patterns. I learned about the various sounds on the monitor—which beeps were alarming and which ones I could ignore. I began to get a feel for this little one’s personality. Finally she got to come home at the grand weight of four pounds, eight ounces.

She didn’t sleep well at home. She was used to constant light and noise and poking and prodding. She didn’t understand night from day. When she did sleep, I would often be awake, making sure I could hear her breathe. Some nights I was sooo tired that I would inwardly groan when she started crying, again. But then I would pick up her warm, small body, smell her infant smell, and all that was left for me to feel was joy.

Usually I would not talk so much about my personal life on an Easter Sunday. Easter is reserved for the Christ, after all. Easter is for the Jesus story, story of all stories, and it would seem no other stories are needed. Don’t all other stories pale in comparison to the story of Jesus’ resurrection? There is no need for the preacher to embellish it. But my story isn’t an embellishment. My story simply is, and my story is so intertwined with the Easter one that I cannot help but tell it to you today.

What happened next in my story was that several weeks into Lent and into motherhood, a family member of Baby L came forward and wanted her. This was unexpected and unforeseen. It turned out I had to give her up. The day was Good Friday, 2018.

Usually pastors are expected to be around for Holy Week to help kill Jesus and then raise him from the dead for all of you. And the unhealthy church and the unhealthy pastor will start to believe these expectations and think that God cannot do the raising without the pastor. But this congregation knew differently, and they let me be away on Easter morning because they knew I was grieving, and so that is how I ended up at *Lebh Shomea* House of Prayer walking alone towards the cemetery on Easter Sunday.

The cemetery is actually my favorite spot at the retreat center, because while one small corner of it is filled with gravestones, the rest is a big open field filled with wildflowers—the most vibrant I have ever seen. That is why I was headed there for Easter morning—I went for the flowers, but a cemetery seemed fitting too. I was reminded of the women walking to the tomb. I was reminded of my own dreams of motherhood that had come crashing to a halt.

I knew what the women would find when they arrived at the tomb. Christ risen from the grave. But for me I didn't expect much resurrection. My baby was gone.

I was, I can honestly tell you, surprised by grace that morning. I sat down with my sorrow at the end of the field where the gravestones were—no resurrection for me. But as I sat there staring forlornly at the flowers, I was unexpectedly overcome with gratitude that I got to be a part of this blessed child's life, no matter how short, and I was so grateful I ended up joyful. That was my Easter morning spring of last year.

The grief did come back after that moment again and again and again. Eventually I got a call about another baby. It was forty-five minutes between the time I said “yes” to a second baby and the time Baby B showed up at my doorstep two days old, and I spent those forty-five minutes worrying. Could I possibly love another baby as much as I had loved Baby L? It turns out I could. As easy as breathing, I fell in love. And I thought, maybe *this* is my resurrection—the miracle that even after loss the heart can still grow.

Baby B and I were meant to be together. We had the same even temperament and the same uneven asymmetrical hair. Her eyes were big blue saucers surrounded by thick long lashes situated right underneath the most adorable unibrow you've even seen. I still thought about Baby L all the time and loved her just as fiercely, but Baby B and I made a life, and it was equally sweet.

Last fall, when Baby B was nearly seven months old, I got an unexpected phone from a case worker while I was away on a trip in Canada. Would I be interested in a second baby? they asked. No thank you, I said. I'm a single mom. One baby is enough is for me. We hung up, but suddenly I had a nagging feeling. I called back. They weren't possibly calling me about Baby L, were there? Why yes, in fact, they were. That was the question: would I take Baby L back? Heavens, I said, why didn't you say so? The answer is: Yes. Yes. Yes. Of course.

I used to marvel at parents with twins. How *did* they do it? As for me, I would wait until my first child was at least four years old before I had a second one. That was my plan anyway. Instead of four years, there are four months between Baby L and Baby B. I had also thought that as long as I was single, two kids were completely out of the question. That would just be crazy.

Here's the point: Resurrection rarely looks the way you expect it to, and you cannot plan for it.

On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. They were perplexed about this . . . Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.'"

Could my heart and my life stretch to hold two babies? Could the women's hearts and minds stretch to hold the reality of a risen Lord? They started out scared, but ultimately the answer was yes.

Sometimes I wonder if we have made such a big deal out of Easter that we have removed it from the day-to-day realities we face. Resurrection is some giant miracle that happened once to Jesus, because Jesus was God, but it isn't something that can happen to us on a regular ol' Tuesday. But what if the point of the Easter story wasn't to give us one larger-than-life miracle to look back on but to usher our ordinary lives into the miracle of God's love on a present day basis? What if the cycle of life, death, life wasn't just some supernatural experience reserved for the Son of God but a mystery that all God's children can live into and be part of in the here and now?

Maybe that all sounds a little too mystical, but I just know that for me, last year I entered the story in a new way. For example, on Good Friday I lost my baby, and suddenly the Mother Mary was as real to me as if she were standing in this room holding my hand. Here was a woman who knew what it was to give up a child without wanting to. Here was a woman who had to trust God's love even when her child was taken from her. Here was a woman who understood. I talked to Mary a lot that weekend last year, and in my spirit, it seemed to me that she answered. That she spoke to me of the wide, wide Mother-Love of God that cannot stop caring, not ever. That I could trust her, trust God, trust that Mother-Love with my baby; that they would keep watch when I could not. What if the point of the Easter story isn't to give us one larger-than-life miracle to look back on but to usher our ordinary lives into the miracle of God's love on a present day basis?

You know what is weirder than weird to me? Easter 2019. Because this year I had to give up Baby B on Good Friday. Could the timing be any more eerie? Two years in a row. What is the universe up to?

Two weeks ago I was in Canada again. My new friend Cathy was at the piano talking to Gillian. I sat down beside Cathy on the piano bench because my heart was heavy. I told them that Baby B would soon be leaving my care. "Can we sing you a lullaby?" Cathy asked, ever so gently. I said "Yes," and they sang to me, there in the dark church chapel. Later I learned this was the lullaby Cathy sang to her mother when she was in hospice. As Cathy put it, it was the song she sang to "midwife her mother to the other side." After they were finished singing me the lullaby, Cathy

put her arms around me and sang another song. This one was about the Mother Mary, asking her to hold Baby B and to hold us. When she was done, I looked at her in shock. “Wow,” I said, “I sing to Mary every night for my girls. That’s how I put them to bed.” I had never told anyone this before, because I figured it sounded a little too Catholic for a Protestant girl, so it was just a little secret between Mary, God, and me. Cathy looked back at me, “Wow,” she said. “I’ve never sang that song before. It just came to me in the moment. I received an image of Mary holding you in her arms.” And then she sang it to me again, only this time the Mother Mary was holding Kyndall.

You guys, I have no idea what is going on in my own life or how this story ends. I’m just reporting to you the mystery of God’s love at work in the midst of life and loss.

Here are some things I have learned inside that mystery:
Death is a part of life, and loss is a part of love. On the other side of death and loss, this is what you will find: even more love.

While on retreat last year, I wrote this in my journal:

I do not have to be okay
without her
This does not have to be easy
I do not have to handle
everything with grace
I have permission to grieve
hard
to cry
to remember every detail,
to miss her fiercely
I can want her back—
which I do—
while trying to adjust that she won’t
come back
barring some crazy miracle
which, if I’m honest, I daydream about
and try to work out
in my head
But my heart is suffering a Good Friday—
a release, a letting go
a surrender I didn’t and do not want
This motherhood with Baby L
is in the grave
and I keep trying to imagine
resurrection,
which probably means
in this case
another baby

but I can't stop loving L
in all her particularity
I can't stop picturing L
who I thought
was meant to be mine.
Will I grieve her forever?
God, you must understand
how much I love her.
I am afraid
that five weeks
wasn't enough to cement her
into my being
that I will lose her
all over again
to new experiences
that take her place
that I will lose her to fading memory
and the crowding in of new memories
I am afraid I will lose my baby
in more ways than one.
You know she's my baby, right?
God, I am scared
that I won't love another baby
the same
because another baby
won't be L
I'm afraid I won't get a girl
or that she won't be as cute
or as wonderful
or that she won't be adoptable
either
I'm afraid I won't have the same heart connection
with a new baby
Or I'm afraid that I will
and L will be forgotten
I'm afraid I can't go through this again
that my heart can't take it
I am here, O Lord,
at the tombstones,
literally and figuratively
waiting for a miracle.
It is arbitrary, really,
the day they assign
"Resurrection Sunday,"
We are just reenacting it
on a mostly random day.

Still, I wonder,
why did I have to give up
my baby on Good Friday,
just like Mary?
Was that truly random?

I don't know what random is anymore. Is it random that you are sitting here in this room on Easter Sunday, 2019? Or is it possible God's love is after you, and today is the day you are meant to be caught? I don't know, but I know it's possible, because, as they say, anything is possible with God. Even a resurrection. Even for me. Even for you.

I could say that once again, here I am, on Easter morning, sitting at tombstone that doesn't look to be budging. It would be true to tell you that here I am again, observing Easter in the midst of personal loss. Maybe that is true for some of you too. There is no special magic to Easter Sunday to suddenly make you feel joyful if, at the moment, life is crap. But there is a little piece of magic I do know. On the other side of death and loss, this is what you will find: even more love. After Baby L left, I found it in Baby B. Even more love. I found it sitting in a cemetery full of wild flowers overcome by gratitude. Even more love. I found it in the communion of Cathy and Gillian and the Mother Mary and the countless others who have shown up for me in grief. Even more love. I have found it in the heart's amazing capacity to keep expanding. Even more love. I found it in Baby L's unexpected return. Even more love. I found it in Baby B's departure, and the way I can sense that my love could never possibly leave her side, no matter the distance between us. Even more love.

So Good Friday your way into grief and sadness if you must—there is no use avoiding pain if it is there. You cannot force an Easter, which is the hard part. Waiting with the unknown and unseen can be excruciating. The amazing part is this: eventually Love will find you. Life. Death. Life. It's not just for Jesus. The cycle, the promise, is for you too. I have no idea how to explain it to you; I really don't. All I can do is tell you the stories. Amen.