



THE Faithful WAIT

Christine M. Eberle

On Good Friday afternoon I got to church early and found myself alone. The parish staff and die-hard congregants had been out in the neighborhood since lunchtime, braving the damp chill for Urban Stations of the Cross, and choir practice for the 3:00 PM service wasn't scheduled to start for a little while. Not only was I alone in church, but I was more alone than on any other day of the year, as the tabernacle sat empty behind the altar, doors gaping wide.

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Although I could have sought out the repository in the small chapel next door, I was surprised to find myself undisturbed by the empty tabernacle. The cold, silent Friday church was still buzzing with Thursday's warmth and rejoicing, and even that was just a subdued preview of the jubilation awaiting us Saturday night at the Easter Vigil. And so the empty tabernacle, though jarring, did not drive me away.

Sitting there in front of it, I had the oddest image of myself. I suddenly felt like a small dog—sitting at a window in a little mutt—sitting at a window in patient but eager expectation of her master's return. I remembered tales of dogs who did just that at a beloved owner's graveside, but I did not feel any of the pathos such an image conveys. Rather, I experienced a cheerful certainty that the return I longed for was close at hand. I could wait this out; I could ponder the empty tabernacle, because I knew the Lord was present in a different way: in the very stones of the church that had held our worship the night before, in the people beginning to arrive for the next service, and in my own heart, unconstrained by tabernacle walls.

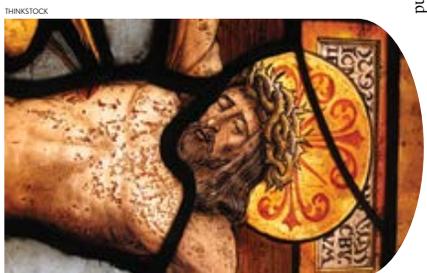
My thoughts returned to this image as I heard the gospel of Easter Sunday morning, in which John recounts the story of Mary Magdalene's discovering the empty tomb before

dawn and running to tell the Apostles. I've always felt sad for Magdalene in this Gospel. I imagine her reaching the tomb for the second time that morning just as John and Peter are walking away, shaking their heads, perhaps having reached a theological insight and certainly not needing to stick around where Jesus' body wasn't. But how could Mary leave? How could she walk away from the last place she'd seen him?

Here the faithful-dog-at-graveside image does apply: big sad eyes and puzzled soul, painful to stay but impossible to go. A life utterly defined in relationship to another person now absent. How could she do anything but stand there weeping? It was the most real and reverent response to what had happened, and for it she was indeed rewarded. The Evangelist himself establishes the sequence of events: first the gardener's guise, the sound of her name from a beloved voice, and that astounding reunion, only afterward: "Go tell my brothers..." (Perhaps if they

had struck around they would have seen him too.)

Suddenly my mind jumps to an empty tabernacle of a far different sort and another kind of impossible departure that so many people endure. It is seventeen months ago, and I'm standing in my mother's hospital room, sunlight streaming in the window for the first time in days now that the brightness cannot bother her. I recall Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" Not anymore. My mother looks surprisingly good; pain is not contorting her face, and the kind nurses have taken every effort to ready her for us, her final visitors. Her hands, which my brother and I had held throughout our nightlong vigil, look the same. But she is gone. Definitely. The doors of her soul hang empty. It is finished.



Remembering that morning I smile, as I always do, at what came next: a breakdown in family

communication kept us in her room for the next two and a half hours. Most of us thought the undertaker was coming to the room, so we settled in to wait. My father knew differently—and thought we knew as well—but he didn't want to rush us out of the room or be the first to say we should go. The nurses, souls of compassion, had left the door respectfully closed, giving us all the time we needed to say our goodbyes—and then some. Goodness knows how long we would have sat there had my father not overheard me on my cell phone



telling a cousin that we were waiting for the undertaker. His head flew up, and he exclaimed, "No, we're not!" After sorting out the ensuing confusion, we gathered up the accumulated baggage of weeks in the hospital and said our goodbyes. I don't know how we walked out. I don't know how anyone walks out. But, as everyone does, we did.

In retrospect, what is most surprising to me is how much more those two and a half hours resembled my Good Friday, dog-at-the-window experience than Magdalene's at the empty tomb. We were, in that time out of time, a

surprisingly normal family. Dad made calls from the room phone, while the rest of us kept stepping in and out with our cells. My brother and I got hungry and downed the previous night's leftover pizza and whatever other comfort/junk food we had squirreled away. We made a coffee run. I pulled out a hymnal (yes, I had brought one with me in anticipation of this moment; Mom would have applauded my efficiency), and we started to work on music for the funeral. The presence of our mother's body—a cancer-wracked, empty tab-

ernacle—was a solid and comforting presence as we puttered around the room doing things for her for the very last time.

Of course, that warm feeling didn't last. Even in the absence of tears, profound grief is much more like Mary Magdalene's inconsolable weeping than any sort of cheerful anticipation of a heavenly reunion. We hear something similar in the story of Jesus raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel. "Your brother will rise again," Jesus assures Martha. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," Martha replies. Listen closely to Martha's tone in

your imagination and you may not hear serene acceptance. Passionate irritation is closer to it, I think: Martha seems to think that Jesus—who could have saved Lazarus' life if he'd just hurried a bit—is now giving her a pious pat on the back instead of an apology. (How could she have anticipated the miracle to come?) Rising on the last day is better than not rising on the last day, but in the moment, the last day is a thin substitute for tomorrow or next month or next year. A brother in heaven can't put food on the table or make you laugh. A mother in heaven can't give advice when your child is sick or bake a cake from scratch for your birthday.

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The countless small losses an untimely death represents should make us run mad with grief, and most words of consolation are a cold, howling wind.

Then somehow a year turns and we find ourselves on Good Friday again. The reality of the liturgy is almost too harsh to bear. (Perhaps that's why we stand during the Gospel...the distraction of our aching feet blunts the pain of the story just enough.) And yet we come—and we listen to the Passion and we stare at the empty tabernacle and we pray for the whole suffering world and we touch the wood of the cross and we trust that the paschal mystery will carry us along. We know that Good Friday will end and Easter Sunday will come, and we hope and pray this is true for our lives as well.

On the calendar, Holy Saturday is only twenty-four hours long. On the road to healing, that "Saturday" may feel as though it will never end as we struggle through the marshes of grief and the quicksand of memory. But to be a person of faith is to carry in our bodies the death and resurrection of Jesus, and so we stagger forward.

And gradually signs of life appear if we have eyes to see. I recently read a "homily hint" for Easter Sunday that contrasted the gifts of Christmas with

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the gifts of Easter. "At Christmas, the gifts are openly displayed under the tree, easy to find. At Easter, the eggs are hidden, and it takes effort to find them even when they are concealed in familiar places. Like the early disciples, the empty tomb nudges us to keep searching—not merely for a dead body, but for the risen Lord" (Living Liturgy, copyright © Liturgical Press, 2009).

The empty tomb may nudge us forward, but it's a hard thing to drag our eyes away from, especially when the risen Lord is so much harder to spot. Nevertheless, we cannot stay at the empty tomb forever. In the Gospels, mourners are practically shooved away. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angels tell the women in Luke 24:5. In John, it is Jesus himself who says to Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold on to me...but go to my brothers" (20:17). And following Jesus' Ascension, two men in white tell the neck-strained Apostles, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11).

It's not enough, Scripture seems to say, to keep your eyes trained on where Jesus has been. He is going ahead of you. Keep up!



W e cannot stay at the empty tomb forever, but like Easter eggs, the gifts of new life are often difficult to find. This is true no matter what "death" we have experienced, whether personal failure, illness, divorce, or any other diminishment. Our impulse is to look backward and root ourselves in memories, even if they are painful. Looking forward can feel like a betrayal—yet all around us well-meaning people may be urging us to "get on with our lives." As we struggle against the social tide that wants to rush our mourning along so that everyone else feels better, we can begin to fear that any acknowledgment of joy will falsely signal the end of grief, and us away, forbidding us to cry again.

But resurrection life is not a one-shot deal. For those of us who are not the risen Lord, new life comes imperceptibly at first, like the shoots of spring crocuses buried under last fall's leaves and winter's resistant snow.

It comes in unexpected laughter that may still dissolve in tears. It comes when we hold the family's first baby to be born after a death and realize how irreplaceable life is. It comes when

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