

The Rev. Dr. Pamela Dolan
The First Easter
Sunday, March 31, 2024
John 20:1-18

Recently a friend who was trying to understand why I left academia asked me, “What was the hardest thing about working on a Ph.D. in literature?” At first, I wasn’t sure. Was it teaching? No, not really. Was it grading papers? No. And it wasn’t the research or the writing either. Not exactly. It was really hard to put into words. But in talking to my friend and answering her patient questions I was able to build a picture, a story about that time, that helped me make sense of it.

I realized that at least *one* of the hardest things for me was that the program I was in was taking something I had loved my whole life—books, stories, poetry—and turning it into a *job*. Much to my chagrin, it turned out I wasn’t in a doctoral program to gush over how much I loved Jane Austen’s novels or rhapsodize about the theological depth of a T.S. Eliot poem. I was there to *dissect* these works of literature, to read *about* them and analyze and deconstruct them. This was serious business! I was not there simply to share with the world how much I loved books, or how reading had changed my life. I was there to become an expert, a professional, not to revel in my amateur infatuation with the English language.

My friend responded with a familiar image, but one that resonated with me. She said it was like I was being asked to take a piece of literature, something that was alive to me in its beauty and power, and pin it on a piece of cardboard, the way collectors pin butterflies in a display case. The problem is, only butterfly that fits into a collection is a dead butterfly. For me, the approach I was being taught to studying literature was killing it...or at least killing my joy in it.

Most of us are products of a culture that wants everything to be explained rationally, to be examined and neatly classified. W.B. Yeats believed there was a “rage for order” at the heart of civilization. This is not just something that afflicts the Ivory Tower. Conspiracy theories, however chaotic and bizarre they might seem from the outside, are the ultimate expression of this desire to put everything in its place, to get to the bottom of any apparent mystery or strange coincidence. There has to be an explanation! Somebody must be responsible! Stuff doesn’t just *happen*, does it?

If there is one thing that I don't want to ever do on Easter, it is to explain away the mystery. Even though it *literally* is my job to tell you that Christ is risen, that the world changed forever on that first Easter morning, I don't ever want it to *feel* like a job. I wish there were some way I could bypass all the words and all the explanations and just transport us back to the garden, back to that moment when Mary Magdalene heard Jesus calling her name. I wish we could see the look on her face, hear the amazement and joy in her voice when she tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

To paraphrase the late great sitcom *Community*, "Would that this pulpit were a time pulpit!" It is tempting to think that the Resurrection would be so much easier to understand if we had been there. Really, though, most of the people who were there, who witnessed the events of that first Easter, still didn't understand right away what was happening.

One of the things I love about the Gospel of John is that it respects the mystery at the heart of faith. Unlike the other Gospels, John does not tell us why Mary went to the garden. In this account she is not carrying spices to anoint the body of Jesus. She is not worrying about who will roll away the stone. She is just there, walking to the tomb, while it was still dark. No explanation, no striving to understand, just evocative images. A garden. An empty tomb. A woman weeping. Two angels dressed all in white.

Professor Joy J. Moore says that "Gardens are the place where heaven and earth collide"¹ and her insight leads us to realize how many opposites are brought together in this moment of resurrection. The whole scene takes place as the darkness of night is turning slowly into the light of day. Doubt collides with hope, despair with belief. Death is overcome by the power of new and eternal life. Mary does not recognize Jesus, but Jesus calls her by name, just as God has called him beloved. The humble Jesus of Nazareth has become the glorified Christ. The whole world is turned upside down and yet it is now, at last, right side up, in a way that it hasn't been since the beginning of time.

Last summer I spent a couple of days by myself on the island of Iona, in the Scottish Hebrides. One of the most memorable sights there is a large granite cross, roughly a thousand years old, located near the famous abbey. It is shaped like a typical Celtic cross, with a circle surrounding the area where the two arms of the cross meet; it is also covered in beautiful carved decorations and stands roughly 15 feet high, so it's hard to miss. It is dedicated to St. Martin of Tours, our patron saint, and so is known simply as the St. Martin's cross. It has withstood the

fierce storms that sweep across that little island for all these centuries, and people flock to it as an enduring symbol of faith, a reminder of what abides in a world where so much seems to be as ephemeral and shifting as moonlight on the ocean.

John Philip Newell has written extensively about this cross, about how and why it is such a potent symbol, about how and why it speaks so powerfully to our longing for union with God. He writes,

“It has four quadrants and four primary points. We see north and south, east and west. We see the above and the below, the left and the right. In the cross, these opposites are joined. The place where the lines intersect is the heart of the cross. The only force that has the power to bring together the apparent opposites in our lives, in our world, is love.”ⁱⁱ This reminded me powerfully of the opposites in the garden in today’s Gospel, and the revelation of divine love that came from it. Newell believes that a desire for love is what animates all of life.

He concludes, “This longing that is so deep in the human soul is also deep in the very matter of the universe. It is the yearning at the heart of everything. That is why the Celtic high cross, rooted firmly in the earth and standing tall in the great cathedral of nature, beckons us to join the yearning that is in all things. The cross symbol and the circle symbol share the same center. They emerge from the same point. So the Celtic cross celebrates that Christ and creation spring forth from the same source. They both emerge from the heart of God.”

That’s it exactly. There is nothing else to understand, to analyze, to dissect. That’s all I hope we can come to grasp in some new way this Easter morning. Jesus came to us from the heart of God, and Jesus showed us what it looks like to live close to that very same heart. And now Jesus has returned so the heart of God so that we too can live there with him, forever.

This Easter, I am reminded that the root of the word “amateur” is love. If an amateur is one who loves, then that is good news for all of us. We do not need to be experts to have faith. We do not need to understand Easter before we can celebrate it. Instead, Easter can be a glorious invitation to embrace mystery and to fall in love with this beautiful, enchanted world all over again. Step into the garden and let God whisper it directly into your heart: He is risen. He is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-john-201-18-10>

ⁱⁱ All John Philip Newell quotes are from *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* (Skylight Paths, 2014).