

Snakes, Devils ... Easter Matters
Easter Sunday
April 16, 2022
The Rev. Scott Walters

I've spent nearly every Easter Sunday of my life in church. But I can't remember many Easter sermons at all. Can you? Don't answer that, since the last five at Calvary have been mine. But I do remember one. Or I at least remember one line from an Easter sermon I heard nearly 25 years ago.

Before I tell you what it was, I need to tell you something about the person who delivered it. First thing I'll say is that Father John Barton is a lover of science. A physicist made an important contribution to John's interest in religion, when he said, "It no longer makes sense to describe the smallest parts of matter as behaving according to fixed laws. They act more like a mind." The physicist wasn't a theist, as far as I know. And he definitely wasn't making the case for God. But that even the metaphor of mind made more sense of the way the physical world behaves than the notion of unchanging laws sent John Barton off in the direction of faith.

John is also a man of experience. Specifically, he's been in recovery for years from an alcohol addiction. At one point he'd lost nearly everything. And I mean everything. He told me once that after his marriage had fallen apart, he was living alone in a small apartment where he lost ... I kid you not ... his boa constrictor. Can you imagine tacking a lost snake flier by the mailboxes? It gets worse. It was some time later when John removed the cushions from his sofa and finally found the dead snake coiled up in the frame. It's like a Far Side cartoon. I asked him how in the world the smell hadn't tipped him off, and he said, "Well, I was still drinking pretty hard back then..."

The point here is that John was an Episcopal priest who knew a lot, and had seen a lot, and it had all settled into his person as a wise kindness and an empathy that he couldn't seem to help. Maybe you can see why I trusted him so deeply. Which is why I can still remember him vividly one Easter morning, sneakers peeking out from beneath his vestments, saying, "I don't know what you think actually happened at the resurrection. And I don't need for you to agree with me. But I think he got up. I think Jesus stood up and walked out of the tomb."

I needed to tell you about John for his declaration to register as it did for me. He was no hardshell fundamentalist. Ardelle and I had recently become Episcopalians in part because we saw in John and in Grace Church an openness to the doubts and questions we carried. We didn't feel like our acceptance depended on being sure about certain things.

At the same time, as much as I still believe we need to, as Rilke put it, "be patient toward all that is unsolved in [our hearts]," our doubts aren't what direct our lives. To live well is to live according to what we trust most, what we believe most to be good and

beautiful and true. Including, perhaps, the need to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart.

So, in the context of that little white church, filled up with overeducated modern Episcopalians, Father John's confession that he believed Jesus stood up and walked out of the tomb at Easter felt like someone had opened a window and a little grace blew in like a breath of spring. Father John was beaming, with as much gentleness as certainty, not just because he believed the resurrection really happened. I think he was beaming because he believed the resurrection mattered. That it still had the power to heal.

I don't know what, if anything, of John's faith and joy I can manage to pass along to you. But that's what I want. What I most want is for us, as St. Paul put it in Philippians 3, "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." I want Jesus's resurrection, whatever happened at the tomb that day, to change and heal my life. I want its power to change and repair this broken-down world. I want it to matter to lives like ours and a world like this one. Don't you?

I love Luke's version of the story. I love that the women who find the tomb empty are flesh and blood witnesses, not just messengers to the men. Three of them have names: Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Other women were with them as well. The only apostle to be named is Peter. The women are also characters of depth and emotion. They are perplexed and they are terrified. They process the strange event with each other, piecing together things Jesus had said that were too strange to comprehend when he said them. As strange as the reality they found themselves in now.

There is also the fact that they had come to the tomb, not to work out a theory or develop a theology, but to tend with their very own hands to the body of their dead friend with spices they had mixed and with practices that had been handed down to them by other women across many generations. These, in other words, were people accustomed to dealing with what is real, even when reality becomes unbearable. Even when it becomes unbelievable.

What I want to trust today is that the resurrection mattered to their world, so I can believe that it can matter to ours. I don't want it to matter only in some invisible divine economy that I'll find out about after I'm gone from this earth. I want the resurrection to bring healing and restoration to a world of bodies that die and governments that are violent and corrupt. I want it to matter to people possessed by the demons of addiction or shame or hatred. Even to a world with too many reminders that we don't yet live in Isaiah's restored Jerusalem, as people don't get to inhabit the houses they build and infants we've loved do not get to live out their lifetimes. I want it to matter to a world like ours, broken in the ways our world is broken.

Maybe this is why I come to this Easter in search of no-nonsense witnesses like those women at the tomb, like a gentle alcoholic priest. Maybe most of all, I don't want my modern, scientific situation to hem in my heart from the power of resurrection. Because, God knows, we don't need more theories, more schools of thought and divisions. We need to be saved.

On Friday I was thinking on these things when I pulled a book off the shelf I hadn't read in years: *The Spiritual Life of Children* by Robert Coles. Coles is a psychiatrist, researcher,

and activist who taught at Harvard for decades. He made house calls as a young medical school student with William Carlos Williams. In other words, he has the credentials of a modern liberal intellectual in spades. Which is what makes this book, in which Coles's certainties and biases get shaken by people he was raised and educated to dismiss, all the more interesting.

In one interview, a twelve-year-old Protestant boy, almost certainly a Baptist, from East Tennessee says, "My mom and dad ... warn us that if we don't read the Bible and think of Jesus, we'll be 'lost' — the devil will win out. I believe them! I see the devil doing his work. My grandma says, 'The devil has slippery shoes,' and she's dead right!" I have no idea what "the devil has slippery shoes" means. And I'm sure I don't believe in anything like the devil that boy had in mind. But he goes on to say, "We've got this 'mean streak' in us, [Grandma] says, and we take it out on people; we express it. It's Jesus who helps us with that; He wants to be involved in our lives..." And all of a sudden, I'm right with this Baptist boy. I know that mean streak, or that alienating streak, or that destructive streak we call sin. And, I have to admit, it can behave less like a fixed law than like a mind, at least in me sometimes. I want Jesus to help me with that, or else, to be honest, I'm not sure what this Jesus stuff is really for.

Because as I read, somehow my mind jumped back more than thirty years to a market in Nairobi where a few other college students and I were shopping for cheap brass jewelry, tire sandals, carvings rubbed with shoe polish so we'd think they were ebony. My college friend Eric was tall and muscular. He played for the basketball team. Tall and muscular would not, you might have guessed, describe me at the time. And the man we were dickering with on the price of some trinket said to Eric, "You must be American. You're American size. This one (pointing at me) ... this one is African size." And, friends, I can still feel the mean streak rising, clenching defensively in my chest, the thought surfacing that I was an American, rich enough to have a used Volkswagen of my very own and three quarters of a college degree. Threatened with nothing more than the observation that I was of average height and skinny, that dark instinct, which has probably surfaced in some form every day since as well, that instinct is exactly what that twelve-year-old boy was wise enough to want Jesus to help him with too.

I know. Can't you come up with a better sin than that, preacher? Well, sure I can. But I'm not. Because in a world at war, in a climate that's warming, when I can hear gunshots at night through the open windows of my house in a safer part of town, it's easy to separate myself from the destructive power of sin in the world. It's easy to believe my 'mean streak' has nothing important to do with what's really wrong with the way things are. But it does. It's thimbleful of the same stuff murders and white supremacy and a lot more are made of. Christianity says that there is a violence that keeps getting passed down, from one generation to another, from one human to another, not through some of us, but through all of us.

Our Buddhist friends remind us that suffering is not optional. To arrive in the world is to be injured by it. They also remind us that some aspect of our response is not optional either. We are conditioned in our bodies and in our minds to respond to aggression with

aggression. We must accept this truth if we're to get free of it at all. Christian faith says that, while every human carries a spark of the divine, we also carry a common wound. There are hurts that we receive and send back to the world before we know what we're doing. A chain reaction of selfish, sinful responses to a selfish, sinful world that are very much alive in each one of us. What neither spiritual tradition says is that there's nothing at all we can do about this.

And what I can stand here and say I believe, to my wounded core, is that in Jesus, on that cross, the whole terrible chain reaction of violence returning violence across the centuries, was broken. It snapped completely. It's grip on all things, for an instant, unclenched.

The world visited the worst of its violent ways onto Jesus, and in Jesus, God refused to return any of that violence at all. In Jesus, the pain that you and I reflexively send some of back into the world when we receive it, the pain we send back as anything from a bitter, unkind word, to a simmering vengeance, to outright violence and war, in Jesus, God interrupted the churning machine we're caught in, and returned only forgiveness, only mercy, only love, only life.

That's the power I want more of in my life, don't you? The power of violence and vengeance, the power of shame and estrangement are very much alive and well. I can present my life to them with a swipe of my phone or a fanning of an old hurt. Easter hope is that our lives really can be fired a little more fully by a different power. We can present our lives to that power in prayer. We can present our lives to that power in service to those who are least in the eyes of the world. We can present our lives to that power especially in the sacrament of Communion, receiving into our bodies the mystery of Jesus's body in that moment when, in exchange for its violence, this world received only mercy. That moment when it, which means we, received new life in exchange for ours.