

Sermon for the Easter Vigil. Church of the Holy Comforter, Richmond Mark 16:1-8 "Broken[Open]Heart"

The social worker moved slowly, unlike her normal crisp trot through the hospital ward. The mother of the dead baby sat in a corner, looking like she had been scourged – what other way is there to look, when your son has died? The baby, born with a myriad of health problems, now lay even more still than he had in life, when he was tethered to whirring machines that pumped and breathed and vibrated through him. Now all was quiet.

And the social worker slowly, reverently made plaster casts of the tiny feet and hands to remember the baby by, so the mother could recall that this was not a dream, that it was real, that he was dead, but he had been hers, growing within her and then drifting away from life just a few days after his birth.

And then the social worker softly lifted the tiny feet and made inked footprints, and asked the mother if she wanted to hold her son, her tiny, still, dead son, in her arms for a picture. Oftentimes, in the feverish clutch of loss, mothers forget what their little ones looked like...and so, now that all the tubes and lines and cords were gone, the mother could hold her boy and a

picture could be taken, all that mother's love evident in her caress of his arm, in the kiss on the top of his head, in the gentle rearranging of the smallest hospital gown you can imagine, in the stillness of the moment, before his body would be taken away from her forever. It was a moment of ritual and it was a comfort and a reminder of holiness in the midst of pain.

One of the things we learn about death, about loss, is that it is too much to bear in the moment, and to help carry us through those first hours and days, rituals can be a gift. When the reality is crushing, ritual can structure our space and time enough so that we can survive. We can make some small meaning of what is happening by following ancient patterns of behavior that distract us from the pain for a moment, so we can catch our breath.

We need ritual in the face of death, so that we can live.

That is one of the reasons why ritual plays such an important role in the church, because we are always in the midst of deaths of one kind or another. Sometimes it's the death of a beloved. Sometimes it's the death of a dream, either our own dream, or the dream of a parish, or the dream of a nation. Sometimes we dream of a return to a past, happier time, then wake up and discover that we are in the here and now. And so

we structure ways of dealing with those deaths to comfort us, to help us face the harsh reality, to begin to turn toward the future. We structure rituals to remind us we are still alive.

In this poignant reading from the Gospel of Mark, a ritual is playing out. The women who were a part of the community of disciples had been unable to attend to the rituals of death properly immediately after Jesus was laid in the tomb and the stone was rolled to close him in – such a finality to that! – but they decided they would go the next day to anoint him, to prepare his beloved body as had been ritually done for centuries, to comfort themselves even if they could not comfort him anymore. They arrived with the water to wash him, with the oils to rub into his skin, with the cloth to wind around him, with the spices that would be tucked into the folds of the cloth. They could hardly believe what had happened in all its brutality and viciousness. They could hardly believe what their eyes had told them, that their beloved, their rabbi, their Lord, had been killed, but they knew it was done. And yet there was one last thing they could do for him, for themselves, so that they might touch his skin one last time, so that they could honor him...to carry out the rituals of burial, so that they could live.

We can picture them walking in the early morning half-light, with the materials they needed slung in carrying-cloths over their shoulders, walking to the cave in which Jesus' body was buried. Perhaps they walked briskly at the start of their journey, and slowed up, hesitating as they approached the tomb, wondering if they could manage to roll the stone away, wondering if they could bear it to see his broken body, wondering if they were strong enough for this holy and heart-rending work, but relying on the rhythm of it, a rhythm that was so familiar that they could do it with their eyes closed if need be, the rhythm of ritual that would help them face the death of one who meant so much to them.

And then they looked up from the path –they had been watching where they stepped on the uneven ground – and saw the stone had been rolled away. Did they wonder about that? Did they think that some of the men among them had come ahead, knowing they would need this? Did they think that perhaps someone had not rolled it into place the night before? But the cave was gaping open, and they bent and peered in. It should have been hard to see, but there was some source of light there, and a young man sitting there. Who was he? They shouldn't talk to a stranger, and what was he doing in there? This was a tomb,

Jesus' tomb, but the body of their Lord wasn't there. They were caught in that strange land between death and life and an interloper had interposed himself between them and their ritual work...

...and then he spoke. "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Incomprehensible. He has been raised? What did that mean? They were braced to see him in death. Now he wasn't here and this stranger was telling them that he would meet them in Galilee.

There was no ritual structure to address this situation. Jesus had been dead but now, apparently, he wasn't dead. They had been prepared to address his death with rituals that were prayer and comfort. It seemed that was no longer required, and there was no substitute to face this new understanding of what was happening.

The ritual had been broken open, cracked into a thousand pieces, since death was no longer the dominating presence in the tomb, in their lives...Jesus lived.

No, more than that: Jesus lives.

So what happens when rituals are broken apart, when presence and possibility collide and that which breaks our hearts open shifts and bends, and presents us with a wildly beautiful new reality? What happens when the finality of death emerges into the glorious infinitude of eternal life? What happens when the tomb cannot contain death, because life triumphs over it?

Perhaps a new ritual is called for in these rare moments when our hearts have been broken open and new life has flooded in...when resurrection – incomprehensible, mysterious, transcendent – supplants death.

In orthodox icons of Jesus transcending death, he stands atop the cross. He lifts the dead from slumber. He conquers what attempted to end him, but could not.

This night, this Easter vigil, is the ritual that takes our broken hearts – broken at the darkness of the world, at corruption and sin and oppression and pain – and shows what

has been born out of that brokenness. This ritual is the retelling of the story of God's love for us all through generations upon generation, through our repeated failures to honor the covenant that God made with us, through God finally sending someone who walked with us and looked like us and talked like us, through humanity killing that one who was sent to save us, to this one end: Jesus' death is not the end of the story. The burial ritual is not the closing of a door.

This is the ritual that reminds us that Jesus' death is the START of the story. Resurrection is not just possible – it is PROMISED. It is promised in that long and somewhat repetitive story of God's persistent love. We live into our understanding of the joy of the resurrection in this ritual because we have experienced the power of ritual when we were in pain. Our hearts are broken open so that the light can come in. And we learn this night, above all other nights, that our ritual is not merely comfort, it is promise. Jesus conquers death tonight and all nights. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Amen.