

Dear all

Back to work after a short couple of days break. Day 1 – shamelessly vegetating, I watched through the 4 Indiana Jones films (don't judge me!). Day 2 – tackling some more of the vicarage garden. I ache in places I didn't even realise I had! I have ordered some new plants, and hope to have some semblance of order for the summer, and, hopefully, the Rose & Sweet Pea Show.

I am reminded somewhat of part of the prophecy of Jeremiah, in chapter 32. Jerusalem is being besieged, and there appears to be only 1 certain outcome. In the midst of all this, Jeremiah receives a word from the Lord – your nephew will come and offer you the purchase of a field “for the right of redemption by purchase is yours”. Sure enough, the offer is made, and Jeremiah, seeing the hand of God in this, buys the field.

This is completely barking mad – who buys a field at this point. Nevertheless, he does, and instructs Baruch to “Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

Jeremiah prays to God “Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” But almost immediately afterwards says to God what on earth are you doing? What is the point?

God responds by repeating back to Jeremiah what he has just said, reminding him of His great power. He then says “I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God.” He then promises that “Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed, in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb; for I will restore their fortunes, says the LORD.” Normality will return – even though all seems dark for the future.

It is OK to fling questions at God – it is so difficult when we are in the midst of trouble, and an end does not seem in sight. But God's promise is forever – He will NOT abandon His people.

Easter is a real time of hope. We have lived through Christ's passion, the death of hope, the time of darkness, of the grave... and Christ is raised from the dead. Death has no more power – it is destroyed.

The Church of England has a 40-day program called Easter Pilgrims. You can either arrange for it to come via an email, or via an app. Either go to app store if you have a smartphone or tablet, or follow this link:

https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/living-out-our-faith/lent-holy-week-and-easter/easterpilgrim-lords-prayer?mc_cid=a63a78d293&mc_eid=79ac894db0&utm_campaign=a63a78d293-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_01_06_10_31_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Church%20of%20England%20seasonal%20reflections&utm_term=0_07f6627c3d-a63a78d293-249525755

I would like to share with you 2 reflections post-Easter, both on the same passage, from John's Gospel. The first from Dr Paula Gooder, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral. The second is from Nadia Bolz-Weber, American Lutheran pastor, or, as she calls herself, Pastrix.



You may like to read John 20.11-18 before you begin.

I don't know about you but I normally find it hard when the weather for the day doesn't feel as though it matches the mood of a particular Christian festival: a bright and sunny Good Friday or grey and rainy Easter day just doesn't feel right. This year, however, the thought of a few spots of rain on Easter day are as nothing compared to the devastation we are experiencing across our nation and round the world due to the Covid-19. This is the least Eastery-Easter I've ever known.

In some ways, this draws us close to the disciples on that first Easter day. Their world had been blown apart. Everything they knew or thought they had known had crumbled before their eyes. They arrived at Easter day desolate and despairing. One of the beautiful strands in the resurrection stories are the encounters that took place between those who were still grieving and the risen Christ. Jesus didn't hurry them or tell them to snap out of it. He didn't point out that they were wrong or should have listened more carefully. He waited with them. Listened to their sorrows. Until, at last, they were ready. This is never more true than with Mary Magdalene. Having found the tomb empty, she stayed in the garden sobbing, another worry – that Jesus' body had been stolen – added to all her others. It was at this moment that Jesus called her by her name.

This Easter may we all hear the gentle call of the risen Christ, calling us by name and reminding us, in the midst of all our mourning and heartache, that we are known and deeply loved.



It's Actually Pretty Easy to Mistake Jesus For The Gardener

Resurrection and the Dirt Under Jesus' Fingernails

(This is an adapted excerpt from my book, *Pastrix; The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*)



On that first Easter, Early in the morning, all the guys had already high tailed it out of there but not Mary Magdalene. Mary showed up. She came and saw the emptiness of the tomb and was afraid and then she saw Jesus standing there and....well, she thought it was a gardener. I have this theory that she never lived it down. If her friends were anything like mine, for the rest of her life - after they'd all had a beer or two in them, her friends would be like,

Hey Mary, remember when you mistook Jesus for the gardener? That was hilarious!

Anyhow, I've often wondered what most people think when they actually take the effort to read the story of Jesus rising from the dead. For many churches Easter is another word for "church show off day" ... when we spiffy up the building and pull out the lilies and hire a brass quintet and put on fabulous hats and do whatever we have to do to impress visitors. It's kinda like the church's version of putting out the guest towels.

But we don't get to do that this year.

Maybe there's a benefit to that since none of that fussy shit has anything to do with the actual Gospel story because the actual gospel story is not fancy, it's downright messy. See, the resurrection of Jesus might be "the greatest story ever told", it's just rarely the story we ACTUALLY tell, because it's not a story about new dresses and baskets and flowers and candy and spiffyness. Really, it's a story about flesh and dirt and bodies and confusion and it's about the way God never seems to adhere to our expectations.

See, when Mary Magdalene, this imperfect woman, stood at the tomb, she didn't encounter some perfected radiant glowing Jesus that morning. Seriously, no offense to gardeners but Jesus couldn't have been looking all that tidy and impressive if she mistook him for a gardener: And here's the thing: I like to think that Mary Magdalene mistook the resurrected Christ for a gardener because Jesus still had the dirt from his own tomb under his nails.

Of course, the depictions in churches of the risen Christ never show dirt under his nails; they make him look more like a wingless angel than a gardener. Maybe because we've had to clean him up to look more impressive for visitors. But then what we all end up with is perverted idea of what resurrection looks like.

So this year, let's just start over. Let's tell the whole thing over from the beginning.

Once upon a time, the God of the Universe was basically fed up with being on the receiving end of all our human projections, tired of being nothing more to us than what we thought God should be: angry, show-offy, defensive, insecure, in short, the vengeance-seeking tyrant we would be if we were God. So, at that time, over 2,000 years ago, God's Loving Desire to be Known overflowed the heavens and was made manifest in the rapidly dividing cells within the womb of an insignificant peasant girl named Mary. And when the time came for her to give birth to God, there was no room in our expectations – no room in any impressive or spiffy or safe place. So God was born in straw and dirt. He grew up, this Jesus of Nazareth, left his home, and found some, let's be honest, rather unimpressive characters to follow him. Fishermen, Tax collectors, sex workers, homeless women with no teeth, people from bad neighbourhoods, Miley Cyrus and Glenn Beck. If you think I'm kidding... read it for yourselves. These people were questionable at best. So, with his little band of misfits Jesus went about the countryside turning water to wine, eating with all the wrong people, casting out demons, angering the religious establishment and insisting that in him the kingdom of God had come near, that through him the world according to God was coming right to us. He touched the unclean and used spit and dirt to heal the blind and said crazy destabilizing things like the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and sell all you have and give it to the poor.

And the thing that really cooked people's noodles wasn't the question "is Jesus like God" it was "what if God is like Jesus". What if God is not who we thought? What if the most reliable way to know God is not through religion, not through a reward and punishment program, but through a person. What if the most reliable way to know God is to look at how God chose to reveal God's self in Jesus?

Because that changes everything. If what we see in Jesus is God's own self revealed, then what we are dealing with here is a God who is really bad at choosing friends. A God who would rather die than be in the sin accounting business anymore. A God who would not lift a finger to condemn those who crucified him, but went to the depths of Hell rather than be apart even from his betrayers. A God unafraid to get his hands dirty for the ones he loves. This, this is the God who rises to new life with dirt still under his nails and chooses a woman with a past to tell everyone else about it.

So while churches may try and clean Jesus up to make him seem nice and spiffy, The God of resurrection, the God who brings life out of death isn't satisfied with making you good or nice. If you think that's what resurrection looks like, if you think it looks like perfection and piety and therefore you haven't experienced it, you might be wrong.

The band the Hold Steady has some perfect lyrics about that: She crashed into the Easter Mass with her hair done up in broken glass. She was limping left on broken heels. When she said 'Father can I tell your congregation how resurrection really feels?'

See, God isn't about making you spiffy. God isn't about making you nicer. God is about making you new. And new doesn't always look perfect, with a fabulous new dress, because like the Easter story itself, new can be messy. New still has dirt under its nails.

New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between two family members - neither of which actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like every fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without and then somehow living without it anyway. New is the thing you never saw coming... never even hoped for, but ends up being what you needed all along and it happens to all of us. Because God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and pulling us out of the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over. So yes, even now, event his year, Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death – and to those in the tombs, bestowing life. Defiantly believe it with me. And if you can't, that's cool. I'll believe it for you. Amen.

Prayer for Easter Sunday 2020

Dear God,

As you did your son, Drag us out of our tombs.

There is no virtue in the world, no lifestyle choices, no amount of wokeness that can pull the sun up from the East each day, Lord.

So turn our heads, even if ever so slightly, toward the dawn, so that we may know that it is your grace that both raises the sun and raises the dead.

Even if we have given up, yank us out of our graves of choice.

Rescue us from despairing.

When we return to tombs that are no longer meant for us:

revive old resentments,

pick up a drink after years of sobriety;

again give pieces of our hearts to that which can never love us back,

remind us that you never tire of reaching into tombs and loving us back to life.

Comfort the dying, Lord.

Revive the faltering.

Grant us joy and make our song Alleluia... not because we aren't paying attention, but because we are.

Amen.

Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark