

Ordinary Resurrections

A sermon preached on Easter 2010 at The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois.

Her name was Martha, though the people who knew her from childhood called her Muffy. I first met her at a church where I served during seminary on the Upper East of Manhattan. In adulthood, the nickname did not quite gibe with a graduate from Harvard Law School, who had embarked on a successful career as a corporate lawyer. So she went by Martha. I learned her story, how she had left that legal career for the west coast to care for a sibling who was terminally ill. Upon return, after her sibling had died, she began a new chapter, committing herself to the life of the church, enrolling in seminary. Our paths parted, as I left the city for my first job in Rhode Island. She stayed in New York and was ordained to the priesthood there. The next thing I heard was that she'd been named priest in charge of a parish in one of the poorest sections of the South Bronx.

From a distance, I've followed her ministry in this parish, as she built educational and spiritual programs for the young people of that challenged community, programs so compelling that they got the attention of the author Jonathan Kozol. He spent time at Martha's church, and wrote about the community in several books, books which include biting social critique, but which mostly hailed the renewal in the lives of these children. The renewal is captured in the titles of one of the books: *Ordinary Resurrections*. It may sound like an oxymoron. Is resurrection ever ordinary? I was struck that a person who was not a Christian would embrace this churchy language. In the book, he explains that the word "resurrection", in the Greek "anastasis", literally means "to stand again". He tells stories of children knocked down by life standing again. He saw resurrection in the lives of ordinary people.

Welcome to Easter, the feast of the Resurrection, which has as its headline the following good news: Because Jesus Christ was resurrected, we will be resurrected, too. Because Jesus was able to stand again, we will stand again, too. St. Paul, in today's reading, uses language of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the resurrected Christ as the first fruits. Translation: Christ leads the way for us. His rising to new life opens the way for our rising to new life. Today we pull out all the stops to say that can still happen. We celebrate faith in ordinary resurrections. And there are all kinds of places to find them.

I recently returned from travel in South Africa, where I was privileged to see resurrection in the lives of ordinary people. South Africans spoke again and again about 'our Easter', by which they meant the fall of apartheid 20 years ago. I met people who had been imprisoned with Nelson Mandela and now served as tour guides of that prison to witness to the possibility of transformation. I had dinner with a woman (tripe) who had watched friends assaulted and killed, She now works to provide heal the nation. I met people who'd been literally and figuratively knocked down, able to stand again. I met an Anglican priest who had devoted his life to ending the injustice of apartheid. One day, in 1990, as the nation neared the end of that struggle, this priest opened a religious magazine that came in the mail. It triggered a letter bomb which tore off both his hands. He was in rehab for long time, laid low, unable to stand. But he addressed our group, standing again, resurrected to carry out a mission of healing for all who know life's hurts. With a contagious joy, with no hint of resentment or vengeance, with arms outstretched, shiny metal pincers replacing hands which were once lifted to

celebrate the eucharist, he claimed he was now a better priest, with a clear call to bring healing to a broken church, a broken nation, to broken lives. He was able to stand again.

I'm mindful that in our church calendar, today is not only the feast of the resurrection. Our church remembers that 42 years ago today, Martin Luther King, a saint in our church, stepped out on a motel balcony where his life ended. I came across a sermon he preached on Easter in 1957, describing the meaning of Easter, in his words, a day above all days. According to Dr. King, Easter means that what stops us does not stop God. Easter means that man's extremity is God's opportunity. Easter means that death is not a period which ends this great sentence of life but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. He said: If you live close to Jesus Christ, there is something that cries out to you, "If you can just stand up with Good Friday, there is another day that emerges, there is an Easter that comes out." He believed in resurrection, that it was possible to stand again.

Do we? Do we believe in ordinary resurrections, resurrections in our lives, in our church in our world? A good topic for Easter dinner conversation, in case there's a lull: Where have you seen resurrections, ordinary or not? In this parish, in the last year, people have been knocked down with illness, economic challenge, all kinds of loss. The ministry of this community has been to help people stand again. We're here all year long to try to do that. In this parish, in the last year, there have been way too many times for us to see that paschal candle, a sign of resurrection. We light it not only on Easter, but whenever we have a burial, moments when friends and family are knocked down with grief. In the midst of things beyond our understanding, we proclaim our confidence in life that never ends, life that is changed not ended. The grief is an experience known to many, probably all. For that reason it is no surprise that it is an experience reflected in the Bible, in the story from John's gospel. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She bowed down to look in, to see where her Lord had been taken. She was bowed down with grief. But she was able to stand again when Jesus called her by name, when he called her to be the first witness that he was alive, that the story wasn't over. Because Christ was raised, she was raised, too. Guess what. That can happen for each of us too. Think about whatever it is that lays you low, whatever causes you to bend under the pressure. Take a moment of silence. Can you hear, can you imagine, Jesus calling your name, inviting you to stand again. Can you hear him asking to help make that happen for others, in places like the South Bronx or South Africa, places like Haiti or Chile, places like North Chicago or Waukegan, places like the Episcopal Church, which many feels need resurrection, places like Lake Forest where many are bowed down with loneliness, illness, anxiety, loss, economic challenge. It can happen to ordinary people like you and me. It can happen through ordinary people like you and me. It can happen as we hear the voice of Jesus inviting us to stand again, and to begin the eternal life he promises right now.

That possibility is what all the fuss is about today, all this elegant festivity. It is to say, as Dr. King put it, that our extremity is God's possibility. It is to say that what stops us does not stop God. It is to embrace the promise, the possibility, the hope, the joy, the faith, the mystery, the good news that because the Lord is risen indeed, we can rise again too. For that reason, we celebrate the feast of the resurrection and say: Alleluia. The Lord is risen.