

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Resurrection of Our Lord • April 21, 2019

Acts 10:34-43 • Psalm 118:1-1, 14-24 • 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 • Luke 24:1-12

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In a recent essay about undergoing treatment for breast cancer, Anne Boyer wrote, “Every cell is a kingdom of both substance and spirit, and any kingdom can be overthrown. Our life force, like our bodies, never seems to issue away from us all at once.”¹ In other words, we don’t die all at once; we die inch by inch.

Luther used to call those slides toward nothingness “little deaths.” They remind us that we don’t live forever, that we have limits, that we are finite. For some of us, those little deaths are physical. We lose the ability to do certain things. To walk, to get dressed, to drive. You’re told that the walker, the aide, the Lifeline is for your own good, but you don’t know. For some of us, those little deaths are medical. In the name of health, we leave bits of us behind in hospitals and clinics. Hips, breasts, valves, knees. For others of us, those little deaths are our stories. You visit your parent in the Alzheimer’s unit, and the memories of this person’s life are held only by the pictures on the wall. Those little deaths remind us that we enter the world inch by inch. And we leave it inch by inch, too.

But there’s another kind of little death, too. Not physical, medical, or cognitive. But personal nonetheless. A kind of death that most of us not only experience but are taught as a kind of wisdom early on in life: the death of our self-worth and dignity. As children we are taught that the world is an uncertain, dangerous place. And at some point, you are going to bump into the sharp edge of the world that doesn’t recognize your value as a person. So when the world starts to close in on you, just make yourself a little bit smaller. Just try not to get hurt.

When you get harassed at work, remember to be glad you even have a job. When your family disowns you, remember that change is hard. And when people tell you to go back where you came from, remember that it’s not bigotry, it’s just economic anxiety. So lower your expectations. Don’t hold your opinions too strongly or your values too tightly. And whatever you do, don’t get too attached to your integrity as a person. It only makes it harder when you have to give it up.

That is exactly how the people in today’s gospel reading felt. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the apostles, the other women, and Peter. They have staked their lives on Jesus’s claim that, in his ministry, the kingdom of God has entered into the world. That God’s *Yes* of mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation and compassion has come into the world and that a new way of living and forming communities is now possible. That the life that God intends for all people, life free of fear and anxiety and hatred, is on the horizon. But the world said *No* to God’s *Yes*, and now they are left to pick up the pieces of whatever is left. Jesus died on Good Friday, but they all experienced a little death, too.

So the women who went to the tomb that morning to anoint Jesus’s body were doing the best they could. Likely thinking that maybe the real problem wasn’t that Jesus was crucified, it was that they got their hopes up in the first place. You can’t keep doing that to yourself. And now the best they can do is to give Jesus a proper burial before going back to lives that are a little bit smaller, a little bit closer to death than they were just a few days ago.

And how does Luke put what happens next? “They did not find the body.” This is an almost absurdly obvious point, but it’s worth taking a second to think about. For Luke, Easter is about bodies. What the women find is not simply that they can still follow Jesus’s teachings even after he’s

¹ Anne Boyer, “What Cancer Takes Away,” *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2019.

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

gone. It's not that Jesus has given them some kind of spiritual caffeine boost so they can pray better. It isn't even that a little part of you kind of keeps on going forever after you die. No, what they discover that Jesus who died into nothingness, who has been dead for three days, has been raised from death. They discover that God's *Yes* to Jesus's life is bigger than the world's *No*. That even when we've come to the end of our resources and imagination and limits, God is there on the other side doing what God always does. Creating. Loving. Redeeming.

So what the women at the tomb discover, what we all discover, is not just the absence of Jesus's body. We discover something about ourselves. That our bodies have value. Our humanity has significance. Our lives have integrity. No matter what anyone else says about them. Whenever the world *No* to us, God keeps on saying *Yes*.

After the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last fall, a group of us went to Temple Beth Rishon the next Shabbat. And the sanctuary that night was way fuller than usual. Lots of people who were there said they don't go often, but they had to be there that night. So we light the Shabbat candles, say some prayers, hear some readings. And then we get to Reb Beni's sermon. And everyone's waiting to see what kind of wisdom, what kind of comfort he's going to come up with. What do you say after eleven people have been killed? And what does he say?

Wear a kippah for a week. Even if you normally don't. Just do it for a week. Wear a kippah as a sign that you're not going to make yourself smaller. Wear a kippah as a sign that you're proud. Wear a kippah so that your brothers and sisters know that they're not alone. Wear a kippah because you know that hatred's *No* is drowned out by God's *Yes*. If you say that I don't belong in the public sphere, I'm going to take up even more space. If you say I don't have a right to pray how I want, I'm going to pray even harder. If you say I don't belong in this community, I'm going to put my roots down even deeper.

I was reminded of Beni's sermon about a month ago. After the massacres at two mosques in New Zealand, I went to Friday prayers at the Islamic center in Midland Park. And I was talking to this guy named Raif who has three daughters. And we were talking about how they were handling the shooting. How do you explain to your kids that there are people in the world, in communities like yours, who want to kill you? And he said that the Wednesday after the shooting, his eleven year-old daughter announced in no uncertain terms, "I want to start wearing a hijab to school." And Raif, very sensibly, tried explaining that this was a really sensitive time and she was probably going to get bullied and none of the other Muslim kids at school veil and maybe it might be easier to wait until the new school year. So he asks, are you really sure you want to do this? And she said *Yes*.

And when she got home the next day, her dad is expecting to hear some horror story about how it went. And instead, she came home with a big smile on her face. And said that not only had the kids not bullied her, they thought it was cool. And she got to give a presentation to the class about what it was and why she was wearing it. And they invited the principal and the guidance counselor. And because the mosque was going to be patrolled by police officers the next night, they invited the police officer who would be on duty so they would have a better understanding of the people they were charged with protecting. And as Raif is recounting this story to me, he has a huge smile on his face. And he looks over at his daughter who is running around the mosque with reckless abandon, and he says, "I've never been more proud." Raif went to pick her up that afternoon expecting to find another little death. And instead of found a little sign of the resurrection.

See, it's true that we die in pieces, but St. Luke tells us something else. That we rise in pieces, too. Did those women who went to the tomb experience capital-R resurrection? No. Only Jesus did. But they did experience a little one. A little glimpse into God's promised future. Because Jesus has

777 Wyckoff Avenue Wyckoff, NJ 07481
adventlutheranwyckoff.org • (201) 891-1031

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

risen from the dead, body, humanity, and all, we know that we have a future that changes how we live today. A future that allows us to examine life's big and little deaths honestly but allows us to live unconstrained by the fear of death. We rise in pieces whenever we find that our perspective, which is so often constrained by death, is not God's perspective. Inch by inch. Piece by piece. Relationship by relationship. Community by community. *Yes!* by *Yes!*

Christ is risen. So are we.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor