

“Seeing Easter in a Good Friday World”
 Easter A (April 12, 2020) - COVID-19 (Sunday-5)
 Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:1-6; John 20:1-18
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

Peter Rollins is one of the most creative Christian writers of my generation. His writings and stories are familiar to us at First Congregational Church of Ithaca, in part because I often quote his work in my sermons. I want to begin today with one of his provocative parables. It’s titled “A Miracle Without Miracle,” and it’s based on a well-known story in the Bible, but his version has a twist at the end.¹ “After Jesus had descended from the Mount of Olives,” writes Rollins, “he came across a man who had been blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he cannot see?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ... Having said [this], [Jesus] spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, ‘My friend, go, wash in the pool of Siloam.’ So the man went and washed and returned in jubilation, shouting, ‘I can see, I can see!’ The neighbors and those who knew him as a beggar began to grumble, saying, ‘Has this man lost his mind? For he was born blind.’ Some said, ‘It is the same man who was blind.’ Others said, ‘No, it is not, but he is like him.’ In response to this grumbling, the old man kept repeating, ‘I am the same man. Jesus anointed my eyes and said, “Go to Siloam and wash.” So I went and washed, and now I can see everything.’ To ascertain what had happened,” writes Rollins, “they brought [the man] to the Pharisees. ‘Give glory to God,’ they said. ‘We [believe] that this man Jesus is a sinner.’ But the old man answered, ‘Whether or not he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ But the Pharisees began to laugh. ‘Old man,’” they said, ““meeting Jesus has caused you to lose your mind. You had to be carried into this room by friends, you still stumble and fall [everywhere]. You are as blind today as the day you were born.’ ‘That may be true,’ replied the old man with a long, deep smile, ‘[but] as I have told you before. All I know is that yesterday I was blind, but today, today I can see.’”

Here’s how the creative Peter Rollins explains that story. “All too often,” he writes, “the miracle of faith is reduced to the level of something that can be seen, touched, and experienced. The miracle of faith becomes synonymous with something like an unexplained healing, a prophetic intuition, or a resuscitation from the dead.” “One of the outworkings of such an idea,” continues Rollins, “... [is that] as human understanding deepens, phenomena that we once would have thought of as miracles are now found to have natural causes. Thus it is always possible that what we think of as a miracle today could well be explained by empirical research and human reason tomorrow.” But, he says, “there is another way to understand the idea of miracle within Christian faith. ... This ... idea of miracle does not [just] relate to a physical change in the world ... ; it [also] relates to a happening that cannot be reduced to sight, touch, or experience.” This idea of miracle, he says, “refers to a transformation in our inner, subjective world. ... One is transformed, transfigured, reborn. ... [N]othing in the world remains the same. ... [This] miracle,” says Rollins, “changes the way we see [everything] in the world.”

¹ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015 [2009]), ch. 31.

Rollins is not dismissing miracles outright (he's too smart for that) - he's not rolling the stone back in front of Christ's tomb, locking the crucified body back inside - no, when he talks about miracles, he's talking about something more than just a change in the physical world; he's talking about an inner transformation, an inner transfiguration, an inner *resurrection*, we might call it on this day - an inner Easter that splashes vibrant colors all over the canvass of our world, so that we *see* differently. We can *see* empty tombs in the midst of the world's crosses, or, as preacher William Sloane Coffin once put it: "despite appearances to the contrary, this is an Easter world."

It *is* an Easter world. It's an Easter world in spite of the fact that what we've all been going through these past few weeks feels apocalyptic. Elizabeth Dias of *The New York Times* wrote last week that it has felt "lately like the end of the world is near."² Not only is there a plague," she writes, "but hundreds of billions of locusts are swarming East Africa. Wildfires have ravaged Australia, killing an untold number of animals. A recent earthquake in Utah even shook the Salt Lake Temple to the top of its iconic spire, causing the golden trumpet to fall from the angel Moroni's right hand." It feels like the end of the world, but, she points out, the classical definition of "apocalypse" isn't "end of the world"; "apocalypse" means "unveiling" or "revealing" - seeing differently like the old man in the story I began with today. The virus is "apocalyptic," she says, but it's apocalyptic in the sense that it is revealing things to us. It's revealing "healthcare inequalities" in our country; it's revealing "class divisions"; it's revealing "fault lines" in our culture. It has also revealed, says Rev. Dr. William Barber, what we value as a society.³ Many of the 60 million working poor Americans, says Rev. Barber, didn't have healthcare before this crisis. They "didn't have extra savings," because, he says, "years ago when we could have raised the living wage, when we could have passed healthcare for everybody, [we] claimed [we] didn't have the money." But "now," says Barber, "suddenly, in the midst of [this particular] epidemic, [between the FED and the Congress, suddenly,] we can find \$6 trillion." The virus *is* apocalyptic; it's revealing. It's enabled us to *see* differently like the old man in the story told by Peter Rollins. It's challenged us to look in the mirror - to look in the mirror as the Hebrew prophets of old have challenged us to do - to look in the mirror and see the fault lines in our society, the inequalities, the injustices, the twisted values that privilege some instead of others; and to take seriously the climate crisis - a crisis that demands the same concerted, worldwide effort as the virus, because the same science that warned us about the virus is the same science that's been sounding the alarm about climate change.

And the virus has challenged us to *see* possibilities and opportunities as a church: opportunities for new kinds of compassionate outreach to the community, new ways to connect through online platforms; it's challenged us to ask questions like: What is community? What is church? How far can First Congregational Church of Ithaca extend its reach? The online possibilities are practically limitless. Our church is right now reaching people across the country and world despite the fact that this Easter is unlike any we've celebrated before. We are *seeing* differently - seeing possibilities and opportunities. What else might we *see*?

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-apocalypse-religion.html>

³ <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/lot-fear-coronavirus-pandemic-compounds-dire-situation-poor/story?id=69767857>

Seeing differently is one theme that emerges from today's scripture readings. Today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah offers a splash of Easter color, an Easter way of seeing for a people living in exile. The first readers of Jeremiah were living in social isolation, social distance, sequester in a foreign land far away from normal life. And to these people social-distanced in exile, Jeremiah offers a new vision, a new way of seeing. A vision of love - "I have loved you with an everlasting love," says Jeremiah speaking for God. An unending love. You're far from normal life, and you may not return to normal life, but I will help you create new songs, says Jeremiah speaking for God; and I will help you build new homes, says Jeremiah speaking for God; and I will help you plant new vineyards, says Jeremiah speaking for God. I will help you *see* new things, new possibilities, new opportunities. Jeremiah offers a 2500 year old vision of Easter. Despite appearances to the contrary, says Jeremiah speaking for God, this *is* an Easter world.

Seeing differently is also a theme in today's Easter story from John's gospel. John's Easter story speaks nine times of "seeing" - nine times in just 18 verses - and John uses different Greek verbs to describe this seeing. Mary Magdalene approached the tomb on Easter Sunday and "saw" - one Greek verb -, says John, - she "saw" that the stone had been rolled back. She then sprinted to tell the other disciples that the tomb was empty. Peter and another disciple then sprinted to *look* and to *see* - different Greek verbs - the empty tomb for themselves. (Just a side note here: John's gospel says that Peter and an unnamed "disciple whom Jesus loved" ran to the tomb. The disciple whom Jesus loved? What about the other disciples?, as one of my clergy friends pointed out to me this week. Were they not loved too? Only one disciple was the one whom Jesus loved? This is one of those funny little snippets in the New Testament gospels - those little brush strokes - that make each New Testament gospel painting unique and intriguing.) Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" sprinted to *see* the empty tomb for themselves. The disciple whom Jesus loved "looked" into the tomb and saw that it was empty - different Greek verbs. Then, says John, Peter entered the tomb and "saw" - another different Greek verb - that the tomb was empty. Then, says John, the disciple whom Jesus loved *entered* the tomb and "saw" - a different Greek verb - that the tomb was empty. And then like a Shakespearean play, the scene shifts with Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved exiting off stage as Mary Magdalene enters. The new scene in this Easter play has two actors: Jesus and Mary. The scene begins with Mary "looking" - a different Greek verb - into the tomb. And as she looks, Jesus appears behind her asking whom she's "looking" for - a different Greek verb. And the scene ends with Mary rushing to tell the disciples that she's "seen" - a different Greek verb - the resurrected Christ.

So much "seeing" and "looking" and "peering" and "gazing" in this story. So much "seeing" with different Greek verbs. I think John the gospel writer is trying to tell us to pay attention to this notion of "seeing." Mary *looks* into the tomb, writes John. She then tells the disciples what she has *seen*, writes John. The disciples then rush to the tomb to *see* for themselves, writes John. Both of them then *look* into the empty tomb, writes John. Mary then *sees* Jesus, writes John, and she announces to the rest of the disciples that she's *seen* the risen Christ. John is piling up as many different Greek words as he can muster to describe this *seeing* as if to say, what do you, dear reader, *see* when you look at the world through Easter eyes? What do you notice, gaze at, observe, stare at, look at? What catches your eye? What do *you* see when you look at the world through Easter eyes? The miracle of Easter, as Peter Rollins might say, is not merely discovered in an empty tomb and dumbfounded disciples; it's found in *seeing* differently. *Easter* allows us to *see* differently. It allows us to *see*, as Professor of

Divinity at Harvard, Harvey Cox, says - it helps us *see* “the whole world [in] a different visage. What once seemed hopeless,” says Cox, “is no longer so. What appeared to be final and crushing defeats,” he says, “become temporary setbacks. One begins to see possibilities,” he says, “where there were once only immovable obstacles.”⁴

“Despite appearances to the contrary,” said preacher William Sloane Coffin, “this is an Easter world.” Despite the world’s Good Fridays - despite the world’s “crosses” as the Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino calls them - despite the crucifixions: the crosses of economic inequality, unequal access to healthcare, racial injustices, white nationalism, hate discourses, the climate crisis, the trauma of the virus - despite the Good Fridays, the crucifixions, the crosses, the shadows, this is an Easter world. The Easter story from John’s gospel calls us to *see* differently. To look past the crucifixion shadows of Good Friday to *see* the brilliant Easter empty tomb beyond.

To *see* differently. To see the miracle *beyond* the miracle, as Peter Rollins might say. To *see* Easter. To *see* Easter in places like India, where the pause because of the virus has cleared the skies of pollution, and made the gorgeous Himalayan mountains visible in the distance.⁵ An example of the creation groaning for relief, as St. Paul once put it. Easter is about *seeing* differently. It’s about seeing crosses become empty tombs. It’s about *seeing* the heroism of healthcare workers, who are risking their lives to save lives. Easter is about *seeing* and cheering on those healthcare workers in city streets and on balconies across the world.⁶ Easter is about *seeing* those penguins walk through Chicago’s Shedd Aquarium to meet the other animals - with no human visitors, the workers let the penguins out to go exploring, and I smile every time I watch the video clip of them staring at the beluga whales.⁷ Easter is about *seeing* those busloads of doctors and nurses leaving Ithaca on Wednesday to serve in and support New York City hospitals.⁸ Easter is about *seeing* communities of faith like ours and countless others respond to the crisis in creative ways.⁹ Easter is about *seeing* choir members from a Memphis church where the pastor had succumbed to the virus, standing and singing “It Is Well With My Soul” outside the home of his widow.¹⁰ We *see* Easter when landlords cancel rent payments for tenants in economic hardship. We *see* Easter in the distilleries across the U.S. who’ve started making hand sanitizer. And we *see* Easter when children like Stevie-Lee Tiller in New Zealand start a social distancing movement for children in every country called “The Teddy-Bear Hunt,” where teddy bears and pictures of bears are placed in windows or on porches or in trees so children out for walks with their families can try and spot them.

Despite appearances to the contrary, says William Sloane Coffin, this *is* an Easter world. Easter is out there. May God give us the eyes to *see* it. Amen.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 282-283.

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/himalayas-visible-lockdown-india-scli-intl/index.html>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/carolynryan/status/1248401729479008256?s=20>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/TIME/status/1246256699402575873?s=20>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/SvanteMyrick/status/1247875843218649088?s=20>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/GuthrieGF/status/1247146101850939392?s=20>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/cortgatiff/status/1246086195169447937?s=20>