

An Amazing 'B-E-Y-N-D-U' Day

Text: Psalm 118: 1, 22-24; Matthew 28: 1-10

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A certain license plate has been teasing at me. It's attached to a bright-as-sunrise-yellow car that looks something like an Easter egg. Actually, to be more precise and less imaginative, it's a roundish vehicle we all know of as a Volkswagen Bug!

It rolled into my view not just once but three separate times in this past month with a provocative acronym for this getting-ready-for-Easter-preacher just waiting: B-E-Y-N-D-U. Sound it out with me! Beyond you!

"Well, isn't that the truth," I giggled to myself, "an Easter egg of a car declaring BEYOND YOU!" And all told, it's not so far off! Because try as we might to figure it out Easter is a bit beyond all of us.

In fact, my mentor told me years ago: "Don't even try to explain the resurrection. No matter how bright you think you are this one is beyond you!" St. Augustine said much the same thing. "Anything your intellect is able to understand is too small to be God."

So this morning I simply want to affirm the best of this BEYOND YOU day with you. I want to keep it down-to-earth, up-close and personal. Most of all I want to linger with three strands in the gospel stories that tell us about this most amazing day.

Here's a part of the story that captures me every Easter. You remember, I am sure, that among the first to discover the empty tomb were women. Among them, Mary Magdalene became the first one to preach an Easter sermon: "I have seen the Lord!"

More of her story helps. Mary was weeping outside the empty tomb, no doubt spinning in the kind of tumble that grief brings; and even more, in the confusion that Jesus was not where she thought he was – dead and in a stone cold grave.

Just then, she saw a figure in the early morning shadows that she mistook as a gardener. They spoke briefly through the fog of her anguish. But even so, she did not know who it was until, until, **UNTIL** . . . something broke the moment wide open.

The gardener spoke, "Mary!" She knew in a millisecond the sound of that voice. "Rabbouni!" she stammered. It was an encounter of inexplicable transformation – empowered by what Frederick Buechner calls "that One Voice of all voices."¹

And friends I tell you this Easter truth: there is an unspoken hunger in me to hear Jesus call my name too. Surely not audible. Not crazy either. But just to know and trust that a living, life-giving relationship between us – as I believe is possible for all people.

Another stop in the story grabs my heart, too. I am compelled by the experience of Thomas – his honest searching, his forthright vulnerability, and most of all the disarming way that Jesus affirmed Thomas’s desire to discover Jesus for himself.

So let me just put it out there! Thomas has been very poorly characterized for twenty centuries! Calling him doubting Thomas, as history has imposed, is terribly unjust. In fact, changing that to questioning Thomas might hold him in more honest light.

He’s the one who said “I won’t believe unless put my finger in the mark of the nails.” But remember, he also said moments later, “My Lord and my God!” And he’s the one who dared to demonstrate that belief and doubt are inseparable in the life of faith.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says: “To be without questions is not a sign of faith, but a lack of depth. We ask questions not because we doubt, but because we believe.”² And Marcus Borg said it spot-on: “Thomas simply wanted a faith that was not a hand-me-down.”

I love this perspective in Easter’s story because there is a personal kinship I share with Thomas. And as a pastor, I have heard across years and miles the earnest searching of a great many souls wanting an experience of faith that is real and not second-hand.

A last pause for today – real, and so close to the ground. Easter is something that comes to us by mystery: unbidden, unnoticed and sometimes even uncertain along the varied ways and days of our lives. And mystery pops up in the most unlikely of places.

Like on that first Easter. Two of the disciples were walking the dusty road to Emmaus only to be joined by someone they did not seem to know. Truth be told it took quite a while, all the way to evening time for them to figure out that it was Jesus.

But then came the a’ha moment when they knew too hold: “Did not our hearts burn within us?” So often, it can be just like that. And we who are so focused so intensely in so many distracted ways can miss the Living Presence of God right before our eyes.

Or maybe not on the road to Emmaus but to Paris. I was stunned by the front-page picture of the glimmering cross over the smoldering ashes, at the altar in Notre Dame. A man nearby said in French. “The Spirit will rise again. God is here in the ashes.”

Interesting, those on the road to Emmaus had no idea that Jesus was that close to them all along. Clueless! They traveled along *almost* unknowing. And then, mystery upon mystery upon mystery it came clear: “did not our hearts burn within us?”

Back to that Easter egg car and the teasing license plate. Because I have a pretty solid hunch if we all dig deep and find and tell and question and affirm the glimpses of Easter we have known – it’s really not beyond us. Not beyond you and not beyond me.

It may even be as the Gospel of John proclaims: “There are so many ways that Easter happens. So many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain that books that would be written.”

My dear Easter friends, let us declare the mysteries of this day, even in the face of our Easter hunger to understand that still lives in close to all of us this morning: Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! And Amen!

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¹ Frederick Buechner. Secrets in the Dark. Harper Collins, 2007. As referenced Christian Century, March 28, 2018, p 27.

² “Good Questions” in Centurymarks, Christian Century, November 14, 2006, p. 6