

DEVOTION FOR EASTER

READ JOHN 20 (NIV)

When a loved one dies, there are stages of grief. The first is a numb disbelief that initially settles in. It is, in a sense, a grace. Intellectually we all know about death. We understand that it happens to each of us, but in our heart of hearts we can't accept it; we don't want to believe it. We want it not to be so. For months afterward we say, "I just can't believe he or she is gone."

As time goes on, what begins to bring us to acceptance are tiny little realizations that pierce the fog in sometimes very painful ways that bring home the truth. We're in the grocery store, and the cereal aisle confronts us with the memory of her favorite cereal. We drive by the park and an important conversation comes to mind. We find his sock wedged behind the laundry basket. Reality begins to wake us up to a painful realization of loss.

We read in John 19 that Jesus was crucified and has died. His body was wrapped in linen and placed in a tomb late Friday. The numbness and disbelief have settled in like a blanket stifling the hopes and expectations the disciples and others had when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Now, life goes on. There are things that need tending to in spite of the numbing "I can't believe he's gone."

Mary Magdalene gets up early to go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body more fully. She's worried about the stone; perhaps the guards will move the stone for her to gain access. But when she arrives, the tomb is open, and Jesus' body is gone. Given the circumstances, the only explanation is that someone has stolen his body. She runs for help to two of the disciples of Jesus' inner circle. They run to the tomb, and yes, it is empty. This is where it gets interesting. Remember those small realizations that bring home the reality of death? John takes a step into the tomb, and he really looks. A thought breaks through the fog. What grave robber would take the body and leave the linen strips behind? A thief neat enough to take the time to fold the cloth that covered Jesus' head? In that instant, he believes the impossible. He wakes up to a new reality.

The disciples leave and go home, but Mary Magdalene stays weeping by the tomb, deep in the fog and caught by the storm of her own thoughts. So much so that when Jesus himself stands before her, she doesn't "see" him. He asks her questions to break through the turmoil of those thoughts, but she sees the gardener and speaks out of her confusion, "... tell me where you have put him and I will get him." She can't break

free of the fog ... until Jesus says her name with all the affection built up over the years of companionship they had shared. "Mary," he says. In that instant, she sees him, and believes. She wakes up to a new reality.

Jesus gives her a message to carry to the disciples, and the next time we seem them, they are gathered in a locked room to discuss what the women have said—and to get on with the business of choosing a replacement for Judas. Also on the table are issues of safety: will the Jewish leadership come for them now? Decisions and plans need to be made. Then, Jesus is among them just like so many times before. Imagine the disorientation, the fear combined with bewilderment. The mind can't process out of the fog that quickly. "Peace be with you," Jesus says. Perhaps in that moment, he was calling them back to the words he said earlier in the week, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid." In that instant, reality breaks through the fog and everything, everything is turned upside down. They wake up to a new reality.

Thomas missed out on that group revelation and ends up waiting a week. Hearing the story over and over again. Seeing the rejoicing of his fellow disciples. But in that fog, he cannot let go of what he thinks and is the reality of his senses. People don't rise from the dead. He needs to see for himself. He needs the experience, that inbreaking the others have had. Another meeting, this time Thomas is there in that locked room, perhaps tired of all the hoopla he can't seem to join in. Then Jesus is among them. "Peace be with you," he says. And to Thomas specifically, "Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." In that instant, Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!" He wakes up to a new reality.

This chapter of John seems to be microcosm of the rhythm of Lent and Easter. Throughout the year, we can be overtaken by the fog of the circumstances and occurrences of life. Weddings and funerals, job changes, the arrival of babies, politics, sickness, retirement, and other important things take hold of our attention. Then we come to winter, a time of slowing down, staying in, and reflecting. And in the season of Lent, we bestir ourselves to walk the path to Calvary with Jesus and become familiar again with his voice. He speaks into our circumstances through his life and his death ... and his resurrection.

On Easter morning we have, again, that instant of clarity, that inbreaking of joy. Christ the Lord has risen today! Christ our Lord is risen indeed! The reminder of this amazing truth wakes us up, once more, to a new reality. The hope of resurrection life is renewed in us again.

PRAYER:

Adapted from a line from the prayer, "Sixth Morning: This your Greatest Gift" by John Baillie.

"Grant that the remembrance of the blessed Life that once was lived out on this common earth under these ordinary skies may remain with us in all the tasks and duties of this day until this season comes again."

