

Turning from death to life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 20 April 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Easter Day

John 20:1-18

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Easter humour

Radio conversation released by the Chief of Naval Operations on 10/10/95:

#1: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

#2: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

#1: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

#2: No. I say again, YOU divert YOUR course.

#1: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE, WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE US NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!!

#2: This is a Canadian lighthouse. Your call.

Faith in resurrection and hope in the overcoming of brutal suffering and execution celebrates "the Living Ones." It does so with ever new names and images that reconstitutes the human dignity, agency and memory of those killed ... enabling us to understand the meaning of resurrection as a political, "real" vindication of struggle for a world free of hunger, abuse and injustice.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza¹

¹ Cited from: Elaine M Wainwright, *Shall we look for another: a feminist rereading of the Matthean Jesus*, p101.

1. We can remain entombed yet resurrected!

Joan Chittister reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus leaves us with a question of our own. Jesus is no longer in the tomb constructed for him by life's suffering, by the fear of death, by his friends and his intimate community who betrayed him, and by the power of religious and political institutions. Joan Chittister notes:

The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own [tombs], leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted, and politicians condemned. It is the greatest question of them all in a world that practices religion as an act of private devotion and sees law and government as an arm of God.²

We can remain entombed within our private devotion shaped by our habits and culture, individuals, families, churches, societies and cultures. And when we remain entombed, we experience only partial transformation, unable to journey in the transformative power of God's new truth and life into new identities, habits, power redistribution and cultures.

2. Abandoning our tombs, hope in turning from death to life

Another image relating to abandoning our personal, social, cultural, political and spiritual tombs is "*turning from death to life*".

Turning from death to life is the title of a significant article on Mary Magdalene by Dorothy Lee, a UCA New Testament scholar. She presented these reflections at the 8th Assembly of the Uniting Church.³ I will briefly share some of her reflections and add comments.

The Greek verb "*to turn*" is a key image for John in our resurrection story.

Dorothy Lee notes that the main concern of John's Gospel, "*is the revelation of God's [love for the world] and the human response of faith, signifying the turning from darkness to light, from death to life.*"

And in the story of Mary Magdalene, John emphasises that Easter faith and new forms of life only emerge when we engage in a "turning" at many levels.

Dorothy Lee's first point is that Mary turns towards suffering and death and that this is the right place to search for Easter faith and the resurrected Jesus.

² Joan Chittister, *Easter calls us to resurrection - our own*. National Catholic Reporter, April 6, 2001

³ Dorothy A. Lee, *Turning from death to life: a biblical reflection on Mary Magdalene - John 20:1-18*. "Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope": Unfolding the Eighth Assembly Theme. *Ecumenical Review*, April, 1998

As Dorothy Lee writes:

Without turning to face the one, we cannot encounter the other; in Calvin's words, "without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God"... Yet self-knowing is also divine gift as well as human struggle: "without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self".

Such knowledge is spiritual, but it encompasses every aspect of our lives: spiritual and material, soul and body, sexual, psychological, personal, political. And because it is ultimately a divine gift, this knowing springs from love, not judgmentalism or harsh moralism. It leads to a self-acceptance that (paradoxically) makes possible both self-and-social transformation.⁴

3. Mary is a symbol of radical equality

Dorothy Lee points out that Mary is the first to come to the tomb after Jesus is crucified. Then, after she has witnessed the empty tomb, and Peter and the beloved disciple come with her to see it and believe, though they don't understand, what does she do? She stays there, in her sorrow, expressing her feelings of pain and loss, allowing herself to sit in her believing-yet-doubting. Unless we do that, we take our tombs with us! Then, she encounters the risen Jesus and returns to share her encounter.

I want to note, that there is deep socio-symbolic gender significance in John's construction of this story. I will briefly develop and add to Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's and Elaine Wainwright's insights.

Mary was embedded within patriarchal and Roman Colonial power dynamics, in an honour-shame social system. As so, being the first at the tomb, the first to encounter the Risen Christ and inform her community, in that culture she was 'out of place', subversive and deviant. And there is evidence that within early Christian communities that Mary's equality was a significant challenge to some male leadership. As it remains in various Christian communities today.

Elaine Wainwright reminds us that the encounter with the risen Jesus was not primarily confessional but directed to action, to praxis, "to opening up access to the Risen One on the "open road" that leads to the future."⁵

4. On the road to abandoning our personal and cultural tombs of power, a turning from death to life.

And as we travel the road today and into the future with the Crucified-Risen One, will we as individuals and a community deal with the question left to us by Joan Chittister:

The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own [tombs], leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of the Jesus, the Christ.

⁴ *Op cit.*

⁵ Wainwright, p115.

Will we continue to identify and abandon our tombs at every level of our personal and community life where power imbalances unconsciously pervade our existence: spiritual and material, soul and body, sexual, psychological, personal, political. Will we dare to continue to walk the road of transformation together? For Resurrection spirituality is an ongoing, contradictory yet life-giving journey of turning from death to life.

Conclusion: entombed but moving toward the entrance

I would like to conclude by continuing to share the story of the German Reformed theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, who fought for Nazi Germany in WW2, and then to be captured and discover the horror in which he shared.

For me, the turn from humiliation to new hope came about through two things, first through the Bible, and then through the encounter with other people. ...I began to understand the assailed Christ because I felt that Christ understood me: this was the divine brother in distress, who takes the prisoners on the way to resurrection. I began to summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope. ...

The other experience which turned my life upside down was the first international SCM conference at Swanwick, in the summer of 1947, to which a group of PoWs was invited. We came there still wearing our wartime uniforms. And we came with fear and trembling. What were we to say about the war crimes, and the mass murders in the concentration camps? But we were welcomed as brothers in Christ, and were able to eat and drink, pray and sing with young Christians who had come from all over the world, even from Australia and New Zealand. In the night my eyes sometimes filled with tears.

Then a group of Dutch students came and asked to speak to us officially. Again, I was frightened, for I had fought in Holland, in the battle for the Arnhem bridge. The Dutch students told us that Christ was the bridge on which they could cross to us, and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all. They told of the Gestapo terror, the loss of their Jewish friends, and the destruction of their homes. We too could step on to this bridge which Christ had built from them to us and could confess the guilt of our people and ask for reconciliation. At the end we all embraced. For me that was an hour of liberation. I was able to breathe again, felt like a human being once more, and returned cheerfully to the camp behind the barbed wire. ...⁶

They remained in POW camps until 1949.

And as I shared last week: After WW2 he dedicated his life to become a public Christian theologian and to address the suffering of Jesus and the poor. After the war, he was challenged by the massive public suffering and the middle-class attempt to ignore it, so he became part of the emergent young German political theologians.

⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*. Fortress Press, 1997.