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Between the Cherubim: Easter Day (John 20: 1-18)

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There's so much in this reading we've just heard from John's gospel – in fact, it's one of the richest symbolic narratives in the whole of the New Testament.

I love the way it suggests that, when it comes to recognising the presence and action of God, the more we look and the more receptive we are, the more we see. At first, Mary sees only that the stone has been removed from Jesus' tomb. She calls two of the male disciples, and the first of these to arrive looks in and sees the linen wrappings lying there. Then Peter pants up the straight and goes in – and sees a bit more – the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus head, lying apart. Then the first disciple goes in too, and now he 'sees' we are told, and believes – though what he believes is a bit obscure since, John writes, 'as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead'. They then, and this is also a bit obscure, decide to go home.

But Mary remains, and she looks again, and now she sees even more – two angels in white ... and after a time, a painfully long time of 'not seeing', not recognising, she sees Jesus himself. There's something profoundly important being narrated here – about 'having eyes to see' and the process, the time that takes.

Today, though, I want to share with you some thoughts about a second dimension of this narrative which has been profoundly significant in my journey of faith. It's to do with the two angels that Mary sees 'sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet'.

Rowan Williams has written about the significance of this image which recalls, as he points out, the space on the top of the ark of the covenant, which was flanked

by the statues of two cherubim. The ark of the covenant was a box, clad in gold, which contained the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. This ark symbolised the presence of God with God's people, and could be carried by them into battle or in procession. On the top of the ark, was what was called 'the mercy seat'. This was the space between the cherubim, where God was said to dwell. So notice the beautiful paradox in this. Where God is, is empty – there's no image between the cherubim. To 'see' God, writes Williams, is to look into the gap between the holy images.¹

The idea that the writer of John's gospel represented the risen Jesus in terms of this 'space' where God is, this space between the cherubim, has captivated me for a long time. It seems powerfully connected to the biblical understanding that God is always gifting us with space for living.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is imagined as having created spaces from the very beginning – sky space, earth space, sea space, and then invited the spaces themselves to bring forth life – let the earth bring forth, let the sky bring forth, and so on. On resurrection morn, at the dawn of the new creation, what the disciples are first present to is a space – that is, an 'absence', an empty tomb, the space where the corpse was. And that space signifies that what's been created through Jesus' paschal journey is a new space for living. This is a space no longer hemmed in or constituted by the fear of death and the threat of annihilation. For the power of death over life has been broken. Jesus is risen.

It's not, as we well know, that resurrection simply magics suffering, injustice and exploitation away – or that it 'beams us up' out of the daily responsibility to live and grow. But what it does is create the possibility of living free of 'threatenedness',

¹ Rowan Williams, 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.183-196, p.187.

because it reveals that God, not death or condemnation, is ‘the only ultimate horizon’.² In that space, we can live differently – if only we dare to enter into it.

Here too, the image of the cherubim has been deeply significant for me and I’ll close by sharing how. About seven years ago, when I was in a dry and difficult place, a holy Saturday kind of place, I was on retreat and meditating on this passage. I went for a walk in the bush and I came across two young saplings – their bark shining white in the afternoon sun. They were as far apart – well, as far apart as these two trees – and they reminded me of the cherubim. The thought came to me – I’m living on the side of death, not resurrection. I’m being determined by the experience of scarcity and a kind of death. I haven’t stepped through into that other reality. And though I’m not normally given to spontaneous, symbolic actions – I felt called to walk through that space – to cross over through those cherubim trees, from death to life.

It felt surprisingly difficult to do – and to say to myself, once I’d gone through, now I’m living from resurrection. It also *felt* like nothing had changed – my circumstances, my sense of struggle, remained the same. Yet – I dared to believe that hiddenly something was different. I’d crossed through – I’d laid claim to the hope of resurrection. And only a few months later – a whole lot of things began to shift.

I share this story not to promise glibly that all anyone needs to do to enter the experience of resurrection is to walk through the space between two trees. I am sharing it to invite you to reflect on what it might mean for you to lay claim to the promise of resurrection life, to make that decisive transition and practise intentionally living from here. I know, at one level, we can’t force this. Resurrection life is gift and we have to have done the necessary journey through death, as Jesus did. And for us, it can take years longer than the ritual three days of Easter. And yet,

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.

resurrection is upon us, ready or not, and and even as we continue the necessary journey we can lay claim to its promise and practise living here. For today we proclaim: Christ is risen, the crossing from death to life is accomplished. There is available for us, now, a new reality to inhabit, gracious, peaceable, hospitable and opening only ever into life.

So – we can say the pretty words and sing the rousing songs, and then waddle home again, with nothing really changed. Or we can choose to enter in and begin to share Christ's risen life, in and through the space between the cherubim.

This day I say to you, choose life.