

April 16, 2017

Tim Hughes

Sermon: "Call & Response"

Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 31:1-6

¹At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. ²Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, ³the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. ⁴Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. ⁵Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. ⁶For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God."

New Testament Reading: John 20:1-18

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the

feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon: Call & Response

It is a fun twist of fate that I was briefly on staff at the church where David and Deborah Malone worshipped in Boston, Massachusetts.

David served as pastor here at Brown Memorial in the late 1980s, during a critical period when the congregation’s survival was very much in question. And it seems an agreed upon fact that his strong leadership is one of the reasons the church is thriving today. Twenty years had passed since David left Brown when I encountered him and his wife Deborah in that Boston church. It would be five more years before I would learn of this church in my own job search. So in all our time together, Brown Memorial was never mentioned. We were in a weird in-between pocket of history.

Anyway, today, David and Deborah live in a classic Boston triple-decker that is only two blocks away from this big beautiful cemetery. One of the things that makes the Forest Hills Cemetery special is that it is also filled with sculptures and pieces of art in addition to graves. During the first of many visits with the Malones, David mentioned to me that the poet e.e. cummings was buried very close to their dining room table. I don’t think he realized how excited I would be by that information. See,

I've loved e.e. cummings ever since 9th grade English, where I first saw his bizarre jumbled grammar and thought maybe my computer had a virus. It felt like his poetry was whispering secrets. It opened a door to kinds of writing that hadn't even occurred to me. I wanted to see the grave, I said, and I wanted to see it that afternoon.

David explained to me that while cummings was the most famous resident of the cemetery, he was also very difficult to locate. That's how it came to be that we set down our tea and David, Deborah, and I all started trooping through the graveyard.

e.e. cummings was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts to a blue-blood Boston family. His father was a Unitarian minister and the family plot was well-established in the Forest Hills Cemetery when he suffered a stroke and died in 1962. So despite his world-wide fame and notorious lower-case grammar, he was buried in exactly the same manner as the rest of the family. A small, horizontal gravestone, slimmer than an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper, which simply reads, "EDWARD ESTEIN CUMMINGS, 1894-1962." In all-caps.

"This is it," Deborah said.

"This is it," I repeated. I kind of couldn't believe it. I'm not going to lie. I was disappointed. Ever since I was a kid I had seen cummings as a rebel, a man who flouted the same rules that got my papers covered in red ink. He ran roughshod over 1,000 other boring poets and won prizes for it. And now I was looking at one small gravestone with a handsomely chiseled, all-capital font, EDWARD ESTEIN CUMMINGS.

I would never have even found it on my own.

Maybe this is something that only an English major would say, but I felt a shiver of recognition in that moment. The terrible, reductionist, finality of death. A door shut. The lights turned out. A soloist yanked off stage, leaving unresolved notes hanging in the air. I've felt it much more acutely, of course. Burying my grandparents, dropping rose petals and dirt into a raw red-clay hole in the ground. Blinking back tears when my friend Scott died on the operating table at the age of 25. That

moment when you return to your car in the graveyard and drive away is, simply put, everything that is wrong with being human.

But I felt it too with Cummings because somehow I had wanted to believe that he, who so happily broke the rules in grammar and life, would have somehow managed to give death the finger too.

It's that terrible, egalitarian quality of death that hums like a motor beneath the hood of our Easter story. It comes to us all, regardless of our class, status, accomplishments, or relative happiness. It is our situation.

And see, Jesus had blown open doors and windows all over the place. He had flouted the rules and healed old wounds and made his friends and followers feel like they had departed their previous scripts and were now living in a world where anything felt possible.

See, they had *hoped*. It felt dumb now to say it out loud. But they had hoped it would be different with Jesus. His dying was horrific but his death? At the end of the day it was just another the end of the road, just like everybody else. And maybe that was the most painful thing. The disappointing, ordinary inevitability of it all.

Mary Magdalene rose before dawn, the way John tells it. Maybe the hope had lingered a little, like an amputee feels a phantom limb still moving. More likely, though, she was just grieving and preferred a little anonymity as she paid her respects to the dead in the dark.

The stone had been rolled away. Mary blinked in the darkness before returning the way she came. I want to linger at this moment for a second, because I think it's important. We hold up the empty tomb as a symbol of resurrection. Easter begins here, we think.

Not for Mary. She wasn't looking for resurrection. She saw only thieves and vandals. She went and told Peter and the other disciple: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they've laid him" (20:2).

Now that announcement triggers the weirdest road race between Peter and the other disciple – for clarity, let’s just go ahead and call him John. Peter and John need to see this with their own eyes so they go tearing off down the road. We could spend time scrutinizing the way John beats Peter to the tomb, the way Peter beats John inside, the way they both see the empty linens laid out *just so*, far more carefully than any thief would set them aside.

Peter rushed in, as Peter does, but didn’t necessarily believe what he saw. John lingered at the door, but saw and believed. Despite *seeing* and *believing*, the text adds, neither of them truly *understood* what was going on.

And because seeing, believing, and not truly understanding are the ideal conditions for mansplaining, John and Peter run off to tell everyone the news that they learned from a woman.

But Mary.

Mary stayed right where she was. Weeping and waiting and finally inspecting the tomb for herself. She’s the only one who sees the angels. They tell her nothing. They just ask, “Why are you weeping?”

She explains herself again. “They’ve taken the body. I don’t know where they’ve laid him.”

The gardener approaches from behind. He must have terrible hearing because he asks her the same question. “Woman, why are you weeping?” And then, more to the point, “Whom are you looking for?”

I’ve got to tell you, I treasure this moment. It would be funny if it weren’t so poignant. How can she not know who she’s talking to? She is Jesus’ dear friend. He has healed her of demons. She’s a leader of his movement. She is talking to him, face-to-face, and doesn’t see. *She is telling him about how she can’t find Jesus.*

It makes me wonder – does he physically look so different that she can't see him? Or is it that she is so committed to finding a corpse that she can't see the living, breathing man right in front of her? "Whom are you looking for?" Jesus asks. Whoever it is, it's not him. He's invisible to her.

It would be easy to mock Mary in this moment. But let's consider how she stacks up against the others. First, there are the hundreds of followers who are currently in their beds, doing nothing. Second, there are Peter and John, who rushed to the scene, did a fast take, and rushed off to tell the story without any deep understanding.

And then there's Mary. Pouring out her heart. Out beyond what she understands. Talking with the Risen Christ without knowing it. I just want to take this opportunity to say out loud, on Easter Sunday – if you are a person who struggles to believe in Jesus – particularly the resurrection of Jesus – if you are a person who struggles to reconcile the grief of your broken heart with the God of love, if you are a person who can only say of Jesus, "I don't know who or where he is." There is a place for you in this story. And that place may be a lot closer to Jesus than you suspect.

You know, I can't quit Christianity for the same reason that I can't quit stand-up comedy. I'm a preacher, a professional religious person, I think to myself. Why am I watching Justin Bieber get roasted on Comedy Central? Why do I love Louis CK? It's super-inappropriate.

I can't quit Christianity for the same reason I can't quit stand-up. It's the truth-telling. Sometimes the truth is all we've got, right? Even if it's not the truth we would prefer. There's plenty of bad comics and Christians out there, but the good ones, the ones worth paying attention to – they tell the truth, even if it's a bit of a mess.

Here's the truth of why I am moved to my core, year after year, by this man's death and what came after.

We live in a world that is governed by the crudest forms of power. We live in a country built on violence, a country that dropped the largest

non-nuclear bomb in its history this week, on Maundy Thursday. We live in a city that is plagued by murders and the systemic, generational exploitation of its most vulnerable. We live in fragile human bodies, which strain under threat of illness, weariness, and death. We live with fickle, tender hearts that constantly wound others, even as they are constantly wounded.

We know this, right? We know this on some level, but we have a tendency to retreat into gated communities, draw the blinds shut, light a candle and tell each other stories of God's love. That is the worst. That has very little to do with Jesus.

We cannot talk of a loving God with any credibility without telling the truth of the world and the depths of its suffering. To open our eyes to the truth of the world, to tell that truth without theological sugarcoating - that is to have your heart broken again and again and again.

But it is the only honest place to start. And it is precisely the place where Jesus enters.

Because I want to believe in a God of love in a world of suffering, I look to Jesus, who lived a full-throated human life, who stubbed toes and had crushes and experienced joy and rejection. Jesus who was remarkably brave and who told the truth and who spent most of his time with losers and perverts.

Jesus, who embodied the very divinity of God but allowed himself to be torn apart in the pursuit of a truth-telling, sacrificial love.

That is a true story from the tragic heart of the world that we live in. It's a story that I believe and it moves me to my core.

There are those who would paint the resurrection as the game-changing grand finale of Jesus' human life, obliterating all pain and suffering before and after, opening our hearts to powerful new life, reducing the tragedy that came before to a remorseful footnote in joyful salvation history.

To which I would say: yes and no. The actual story is better than that, if we pay attention to the text.

What strikes me about John's account of the resurrection is how confusing and ordinary everything is. Jesus Christ is crucified, dead and buried, in the tomb for three days, miraculously resurrected, only to be mistaken for the gardener.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and Pontious Pilate is still governor. Caesar is still Caesar. There are new bodies on the cross. The disciples are huddled and hidden away, seeing and believing but still struggling to understand.

The news, though. The news is spreading like lightning. Ordinary men and women, previously just followers of Jesus, begin to do things that ordinary people don't do. They begin to lay the groundwork of the Christian church. The story of who Jesus is and what Jesus did is spreading, not through spectacle or Imperial decree, but by word of mouth, by letter, by eye-witness who can only say that they've been changed. By people who can only say that once they were blind, but now they see.

To me it is the *truthfulness* of the story that gives it so much power. It is the unflinchingly ordinary qualities that keep teasing me with glimpses of resurrection.

You don't have to spend a ton of time at the grave of EDWARD ESTIN CUMMINGS, I now know. There's not much to see. After a few moments of respectful silence I was ready to go home. But David and Deborah weren't finished.

"Now," David Malone said, his eyes twinkling. "Are you ready to see the good part?" He pointed to an old tree that was some 50 yards away. It was thick and knotty and split into a dramatic V-shape, as though it had been struck by lightning. About ten feet tall, the tree abruptly ended inside an A-frame slate roof. It was like a bizarre little tree house. As we got closer, I could see that the inside of the split tree trunk was

covered in a veneer of hammered copper. On the surface of the copper were carved the following words:

**i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes**

It was the entire poem, which is printed in your bulletin, carved into the inside of the tree in shimmering copper letters.

**(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)**

I was amazed. "Who did this?" I asked.

"Who knows?" said David. "Someone who realized that family plot was not adequate."

Inside the tree was a hollowed out shelf, which contained two books in a plastic bag. The first, a volume of Cummings' poetry which you could sit in the hollow of the branches and read. The second, a journal where you could write your own.

Call and response. That has been the theme of our entire Lenten season. It's a musical term, the back and forth of two voices, the interplay of soloist and choir, the cacophony and harmony of multiple, contradictory sounds. It is the Hallelujah Chorus sung without a single rehearsal. It's a holy mess. Call and response is a bedrock of jazz, and protest, and worship. It's a liturgical way of saying, "We do this together." The Gospel is not a song we sing alone.

But look – it's not just a community-building strategy. To me it is also a profoundly true statement of who God is and how God works. The glory of resurrection is reflected in a million ordinary mirrors. You are right

to be suspicious when a person tells you they understand the fullness of Christ's resurrection. And you are wrong to dismiss a weeping person who tells you, "I have seen the Lord." The Gospel spreads socially, communally, in a thousand conversations and in the empty places between them. It is simultaneously not enough and way too much. It's like telling Jesus you can't find Jesus, only to hear him speak your name.

Jesus said to her, "Mary." It was the love. It was the voice. It was, above all, her name that cleared the fog in Mary's eyes. She was in the presence of Christ. For one beautiful moment, the thing itself.

"Teacher," she said. I like to think that the moment they shared there sustained her for some time to come. Now the ears of my ears awake, now the eyes of my eyes are open. No doubt she would have stayed there forever.

But Jesus, being Jesus, gave her a job to do. He sent her back to her friends, to share the news, to share the light, to spread a message that is no less true because it is carried in ordinary vessels.

Friends, Christ is risen! Sometimes it is hard to see it but yet the word spreads, crackling in a thousand circuits and conversations, offering endless possibilities for us to love and live and resist and redeem. Even in our dark and broken world it spreads, telling the truth but with a curious and refracted light, channeling everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes.