

Circle of Mercy Sermon  
Resurrection Story by Stan Dotson  
March 27, 2016 (Easter Sunday)

I want to begin by thanking Mark Siler for the sermon last Sunday; it has been working on me all week, the image of being caught by God's grace. Sometimes I think we have too little time between worship services; a week passes and we move on to the next text before we've had ample time for the last one to do its work. So consider what I'm offering now as an attempt to keep the conversation going.

Mark's sermon brought to mind a poem by Rilke, "The Swan."

*This laboring through what is still undone,  
as though, legs bound, we hobble along the way, is like the awkward walking of the swan.  
And dying—to let go, to no longer feel the solid ground we stand on every day— is like anxiously  
letting himself fall  
into waters, which receive him gently  
and which, as though with reverence and joy, draw back past him in streams on either side;  
while, infinitely silent and aware,  
in his full majesty and ever more  
indifferent, he condescends to glide.*

I remember listening to a book on CD in the car a few years ago, not a great book, Inkheart, a forgettable plot, but its premise stuck with me. The main character has a magical voice, so that whenever he reads a book aloud he reads people from his world into the world of the story, and he reads characters from the story into his world. That's what happens sometimes with the biblical story; we are read into this different world, and that foreign story gets read into our world.

This week, as I reflected on sharing a resurrection story, I felt I was being read into another of Jesus' resurrection stories, one that happened a few days before the story we celebrate on this Easter day, when Jesus made the bold statement, "I am the resurrection and the life." The statement came in the context of a story about Jesus' friend, Lazarus, who had gotten sick and died. Jesus was absent when Lazarus was dying. By the time he got to the town, the stench of death was there, as Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Jesus called him from the tomb, Lazarus rose from the dead, but resurrection is not the end of the story. It tells us that Lazarus emerged from the tomb with arms and legs still bound by burial cloths, and Jesus instructed the bystanders to unbind him.

All week long this story has been working its way into my story, into my history. Lazarus' terminal illness brought to mind my experience in a workplace ten or twelve years ago, a place that became dis-eased and ill. Cubans have a way of describing troubling experiences that are destructive to heart and soul, they say it was *fatal*. That was my experience there at Mars Hill in the last few years of my work there. It was fatal. It was like a micro-climate of toxic air, and at the end of the day, it killed my spirit. I don't know if this micro-climate was like that you see in

cartoons where the storm cloud presents itself over one person, or if other people suffered, too, from the dis-ease.

In reflecting on the experience, I have come to realize that what was worse than the lost battles, the loss of job, the sense of betrayal and disappointment, was, like Lazarus, the absence of Jesus. While we were working for good causes, righteous causes, still, there wasn't an embodiment of Christ-like grace and mercy. We were not being caught by God.

There is certainly, as Lazarus' family knew, a stench to death. After being fired, I began receiving unemployment, with the condition that I would make a minimum of two applications or job inquiries each week. A year and a half of those applications led to no job offers. That stinks.

And then, the voice of Jesus came, from an unlikely place. Kim and I were leading a group for a short visit to Cuba, and we were in the home of a clown, really, a professional clown, Pancho. His brother, Samuel, was there, and he was in a bit of an inebriated state when he said to us, "When are you going to come to Cuba? I mean come and stay? You've been coming for so long on these short visits, always in a hurry, when are you going to come and stay?" This drunken voice was the voice of Jesus; it was a summons to come forth from the grace, a resurrection call. And I woke up, and took my first few steps out of the stinking darkness.

But as the Lazarus story teaches us, resurrection isn't the last word of the story. I became aware last year just how bound I still was, with the social fabric of U.S. values and assumptions. The burial cloths are woven from the threads of privilege, materialism, individualism. And all throughout the year, I felt that our Cuban friends were heeding their own call from Jesus, to unbind those cloths. Little by little I felt assumptions of privilege being shed.

I tried to think of a really exciting and engaging story about how this liberation, this unbinding, happened, but to be honest, it was all quite ordinary. It happened around the dinner table over bowls of rice and beans, or a cup of coffee in the living room, as friends told their stories, and invited us into their stories. I found that my Cuban friends have that magical voice, that ability to read me into their stories, and reading their stories into my life. And it is that entrance into their world that the burial cloths began loosening and falling.

Since we are talking about the Lazarus story, let me share one of the many stories told by our good friend Lázaro in Matanzas. He is among the best of the magically voiced story-tellers. It would be worth your time and effort to learn Spanish just to be able to sit in a living room with a cup of his coffee and listen to him tell the stories of his life.

Here is an Easter story he told me, on the morning of my last day of my most recent visit. We went through the liturgy of coffee-making, a very prayerful experience, and then the stories started pouring out, as I waited for my ride to the airport. He talked about a magical place he discovered as a child, when he would go on long hikes outside the city. After climbing one of the steep hills surrounding the Yumuri valley, he made his way through a thick forest, and suddenly the trees opened up to a wide valley, filled with chirrimolla trees as far as the eye could see. He eventually met and befriended the elderly couple living in the valley; it was their farm he had discovered. He describes it as a veritable paradise, filled not only with the chirrimolla, which

would make the whole valley glow orange when the fruit ripened, but he also found all sorts of varieties of mango, anón, plátano, guayaba, limón. He started bringing his friends to explore this paradise, and his priest, Padre Ramón, began coming with the youth, and the farm valley became a spiritual retreat for them.

When Lázaro got married and his wife, Tamara was pregnant with their first child, she became a Christian, and wanted Padre Ramón to baptize her in a spring there in the valley, on Easter Sunday. Lázaro says that now he doesn't see how they did it, the hike was so long with steep climbs, not something he would encourage a very pregnant woman to do. But Tamara made it, and when they topped the last hill to look down on the valley, they were greeted with an amazing sight. It had been a very rainy season, and the spring had overflowed its reservoir, so that the entire valley floor was under nearly a foot of water, crystal clear. Lázaro spoke with reverence about the way the grass and the small flowers elegantly swayed back and forth under the water, as if they were dancing their welcome to the baptismal candidate. They made their way through this magical valley floor, and Tamara, heavy with Lázaro in her womb, was baptized in the overflowing spring.

I felt myself being immersed in that spring, as my friend spoke the story into the deep recesses of my soul. I was unbound, like Rilke's swan, understanding anew some of the mystery of Easter: the dying—the letting go, to no longer feel the solid ground I stand on every day— *it was like letting myself fall into those baptismal waters, which received me gently and which, with reverence and joy, drew back past me in streams on either side.*

Learning Spanish and going to Matanzas to sit and drink coffee with Lázaro, and to have his magical voice speak you into such stories, is not the only way to practice resurrection. It is one way.