Easter Sunday, 2021

St. Mary’s in Riverside

A recent research project

unexpectedly launched me into a study about credibility

The trigger for this excursion

Was a question about the trust levels of scientists in the US

and whether preachers could contribute

to bolstering confidence in the sciences

around critical issues like vaccinations and climate change.

To my chagrin, current polls demonstrate

That scientists have a higher trust factor than clergy.

For example, in a recent Gallup poll

Religious organizations and their leadership

Garner a 42% affirmation

At the “great deal” or “quite a lot” approval level

While dismayed I was not shocked.

Religious institutions such as the Catholic Church

Have squandered a lot of societal esteem.

When I was ordained, the approval rating was 68%

Makes me wonder how much I contributed to this decline.

True, we look a lot better than Congress at 13%

And televised news at 18%, but that isn’t saying much.[[1]](#endnote-1)

There are multiple factors for the declining approval ratings

Of religious institutions and the clergy who serve them,

Including the all too common personal and financial scandals

That have filled the airwaves over the past decades.

According to the findings leading up to the 2018 Roman Synod

one consistent concern among young adults

was a pattern of tone-deafness on the part of the church

with young folk “vehemently seek” a church that listens.[[2]](#endnote-2)

A parallel worry seems to be the extent

To which church leaders speak a clear truth

Not just about finances and abuses

But about the gospel.

It is a concern of mine on this Easter Feast

When we turn from fasting to feasting

Trade purple for gold vestments

And sing upbeat hymns of triumph and life.

An often-unspoken expectation

For celebrating this great feast and others like it

Is for the worship to project

a great sense of joy even cheerfulness

Heavy on the Alleluias and buoyant hymns in major keys.

At least for me, and maybe many of you, however,

This feels like a season of quite muted Alleluias.

True, the job market is looking brighter

Stimulus checks are appearing in bank accounts

Vaccines are rolling out

And some are emerging from their pandemic hibernation.

On the other hand, people are yet experiencing much loss:

Grieving friends and family

Facing financial upheaval

And uncertain about their future.

And then there is the unrelenting violence

Not only in Atlanta and Boulder

But also, the brutality that mars our city streets

And those of distant Myanmar and Yemen.

And we cannot forget the lives of the victimized

Some who speak up against power

But also, the multitudes who remain silent victims.

What does resurrection really mean

In the face of so much suffering and violence?

And how do I preach in such a way

That does not further erode trust in our Catholic faith?

A favorite poet is Mary Oliver

Most of her poetry takes its inspiration from nature

Rather from the human world.

Her poems are populated with loons and geese

Insects and stars.

She even has a collection about dogs[[3]](#endnote-3)

Whom she once described as

Perfect companions since they don’t speak.

Even though the subjects of her poems

Are not butchers or bakers or candlestick makers

They are always and ultimately about humanity

And especially the struggle for meaning.

There is no poem of hers that does that for me

As much as her miniature musing “The Uses of Sorrow.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Oliver writes:

Someone I loved, Once gave me

A box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand

That this, too, was a gift.

I find those few lines

An unusually poignant lens

For reading today’s gospel,

Which, on this resurrection feast,

Is not filled with alleluias or triumphant scenes

Of Jesus sundering the bonds of death

So favored by Renaissance painters.

Rather, central in that gospel

Is a box full of darkness:

An empty tomb,

That it took the emerging Christian community

Decades to understand as a gift

And not just as the apostolic puzzlement

The faced Simon Peter and the beloved disciple.

Forest Gump would have us believe,

Like his mother taught him

That life is like a box of chocolates

You never know what you’re gonna get.

I’d rather live that analogy

Hoping for the sweetness and the cream

The caramel crunch and the pecan delight

Than a box full of darkness.

But like many of you I don’t often get a lot of boxes of chocolates

But I do feel like there is a steady supply

Of boxes of darkness

Of empty tombs

And of not being able to make sense

Out of violence and loss,

Shattered plans and uncertain futures.

So where is the resurrection gift there

And what in that gift might prompt us to sing Alleluia?

Over the last few weeks,

As I’ve been searching for a way,

to find meaning and maybe even joy

In the darkness of box and tomb

I stumbled across a reflection

Based upon an amazing yet difficult book

*Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering*

*And the Search for what Saves us*[[5]](#endnote-5)

Rifting on the content of that volume

A particular blogger startled me with

With a new take on resurrection

Suggesting that it was a form of resistance.[[6]](#endnote-6)

He gets to this wisdom point

By affirming that

Jesus’ resurrection cannot be divorced

from the violence of his death.

And then concludes that resurrection itself

“is a divine response to human violence.”

He continues:

“the Resurrection symbolizes divine intention for life to survive beyond violent interruptions. It is [clearly] a mistake to say that Jesus’ death was a good thing. It must be understood as a tragedy. But, it is faithful to rejoice at God’s insistence that this tragedy would not shut holy love out of the world.”

He goes on to reason that resistance

is the true work of resurrection

For when we feel grief in the face of violence or injustice,

The memory of Jesus’ own experience of violence

Which did not trigger divine wrath in return

But only a sacred impulse towards life, towards love

Provides an authentic God-path

For resisting such violence

With the same resurrection instincts.

He concludes that Jesus is a model

For resisting every onslaught of violence.

In whatever recurring box of darkness fills our lives

in whatever empty tomb confronts us.

We find the hope of an authentic and true response

To counter the violence and diminishment of the world

With a vindicating and redemptive love.

And that hope … that promise … that future

Is a source of true joy, a cause for full throated alleluia

Not because the feast of Easter

Will eradicate all violence … or even death

But because it offers us

A way forward in the face of every brutality

When confront with any loss …

A path of redemptive resistance

A path of graced defiance

To any force or any person

To any movement or any ideology

That threatens another crucifixion

Rather than promising resurrection.

Over the years I have had some splendid graduate students

A few years ago I admitted a student from Myanmar

An Evangelical protestant pastor and teacher

A father of three daughters

Whose family made the costly decision

To send him to the U.S. to complete a doctorate with us.

After he received his student visa and then arrived

During his first week here

his sponsor withdrew financial support

an essential criterion for getting a student visa.

That same first week in the states

He learned from his wife that they were pregnant

With twins.

So we swung into action

Supplied him with food, housing, scholarship

And he eventually finished his doctoral work.

In the midst of his studies

The twins were born, his 4th girl and first boy.

As an overgenerous sign of his gratitude

He named his first son after me

So someplace in Myanmar

There is a child named “Foley”

A point of consternation for many confused relatives.

As you probably know

in the aftermath of the February military coup

Myanmar is experiencing

great distress and violence these days.

The internet connections are spotty

Receiving only sporadic news from my former student

About the crucifixions in the streets

And his struggles to protect his family.

I am not sure if you have seen the stories

Reported by international news agencies

Posted on the internet

But recently a Roman Catholic Nun, Sister Ann Nu Thawng

Of the congregation of Saint Xavier

Has on two different occasions

Knelt down on the street

Before the Myanmar armed forces

Begging them not to open fire on protesters.

According to some reports,

Her selfless act allowed over 100 protesters

To find refuge in her convent

saving them from beatings, arrest, maybe even death.

What is resurrection?

Is it a renaissance painting of a Christ in triumph

Erupting from the tomb in a technicolor display

Or is it a woman religious

Kneeling on the streets of Myanmar

Resisting violence?

My personal prejudices are obvious here

As I worry about a former student, his family

And the only namesake child I will ever have.

On the other hand,

All those who experience violence and oppression

Dark boxes and empty tombs

Became our children and siblings

Parents and cousins

When we were plunged into that baptismal pool

And marked with the cross

the ultimate sign of resistance to hatred and abuse.

I pray that this Easter feast

bring us to such mission and ultimately such joy

as resistance turns to resurrection

Through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20180508_instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html>, no. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mary Oliver, *Dog Songs: Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mary Oliver, “The Uses of Sorrow,” in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for what saves us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-resurrection-and-resistance-john-201-18/ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)