

Into the Landscape: The Beginning

*A sermon preached on John 20:1-18 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
on Easter Sunday morning, April 1, 2018*

As the mama of three young ones, it is a daily occurrence in my life to have one of my children ask for something again. We sing a song they like? “Again, mommy, again!!” A rousing, squealing Saturday morning tickle fight on the couch? “Again, mommy, do that again!” Best of all are the times where Josh and I read them a favorite story, and time and time again, we’ve hardly finished the story when we hear a loud exclamation, “oh tell it again, mommy! Tell it again!”

Researchers have a name for this — and not just a name for persistent preschoolers! In fact, it’s a rename of the human species from “homo sapiens” (“wise people”) to “homo narrans” (“storytelling people”). This is not to suggest that humans are not wise or thoughtful, but because intrinsically — regardless of age or life stage — we are storytellers. Stories help us to make sense of the world, to find our unique place within it, to help us discover who and whose we are. Or as one writer says, “through storytelling we possess a past — but that past possesses us, too. It’s through storytelling that we find our identity.”¹

That’s why we have gathered here today, isn’t it? To once again, tell an old, old story, one that bears repeating, one that shapes our past and our

¹ This beautiful framework for today’s opening illustration inspired by and quoted from Nathan Kirkpatrick’s sermon “Tell It Again,” found at <https://www.faithandleadership.com/nathan-kirkpatrick-tell-it-again>.

future, one in which we find our identity. It's a story we tell each year on Easter, because we must remember who and whose we are.

Too often, "who we are" can feel like the clumsily-assembled product of what happens to us and around us. We ask: who am I after my mom dies? Who am I if my marriage falls apart? Who am I once the kids move out? Who am I if I get sober? Who am I when I have to stop driving? Who am I if my debts consume me, and I lose the house? Who am I when I get home from war? Who am I in retirement? Who am I if the pregnancy gets complicated? Who am I on the other side of surgery? Who am I if my child wants nothing to do with me? Who am I if my job is lost? Who am I if the depression takes over and it all falls apart? Who am I after the thing I can never unsee or undo?

Churches and communities ask it too. Right here within these walls, we wonder: who are we if not the First Baptist Church on Fifth with the gym and the chapel and the Children's Center? And as a nation: who are we when adolescents can't claim to be safe in school? Who are we when innocent men are murdered in their backyards? Who are we when inequality of color, race, education, gender, and economics are merely the accepted way of things? Who are we when the state of our union is corrosively divided, bitterly split with no real desire between parties or their people to find reconciliation, compassion, or a better way? Who are we when all we experience feels like it is irretrievably broken?

I imagine Mary had many of the same questions early that morning while it was still dark. The last time she had seen him was that terrible Friday, body broken and executed like a common prisoner. She had come to the

garden that morning in search of his tomb, ready with burial spices and oils to share her love with Jesus. But when she arrived, the tomb stood empty – the stone had been rolled away. The gospel tells us she ran to tell the other disciples, who raced each other back to the tomb only to see the grave cloths folded as empty as they returned home. But Mary in her grief remained in the garden, weeping over all that had been lost and searching desperately for the One in whom she had been found. “Woman, why are you weeping?” she heard from a stranger she took to be the gardener, and she pleaded her case again – “tell me where you have laid him,” she exclaimed!

It only took a word. In only a word, what Mary could not understand with eyes cast upon abandoned grave cloths in a darkened tomb, she recognized immediately with ears that caught the sound of her name. In only a word, she realized this double encounter at the tomb, for what she grieved in absence, she rejoiced in presence.² In only a word, weeping gave way to seeing, darkness gave way to light, death gave way to life. *Mary. Mary. Mary.*

In only a word, the crucified Christ names and claims us as his own. In only a word, we are reminded of who and whose we are. In only a word, we hear the good news that what crucified us will not kill us, that what breaks us will not leave us shattered. In only a word, we remember the old, old stories of the God who said to Moses, “I am who I am,” the God who called out by name to Samuel and David, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the God who came to us as the Word made flesh, the Great Shepherd who promised to call us by name. In only a word, we dare to imagine that what Jesus did for Mary in the

² Susan Grove Eastman, “John 20:11-18,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 2, p317.

garden, he can and does do for each one of us. Joy. Nancy. Lenwood. Gene. Ann. Andrew. *Mary. Mary. Mary.*

Who am I?, we ask. And if we have the courage to hear the truth that will set us free, we hear good news ringing throughout the ages from that garden into every nook and cranny of our lives, saying, “who are you? *Who are you?* You are more than a collection of your roles and opinions and experiences and accomplishments. You are more than just the sum total of your failures and your faults and your fears. You are more than what they say you are. You are more than who you thought you were on your worst day or even on your best. You are more than the cross you bear. You are more than the race you are running. *Who are you?* You are beloved. You are worthy. You are forgiven. You are known. You are made new. You are mine.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber once said: “Identity. It’s always God’s first move.”³ And lest the Easter best we’re sporting today confuse us, lest we think a new dress or a bow tie might make us into someone we yearn to be if only for a moment, might we remember that God is never about making us look lovely or even perfect. **Rather God is always in the business of making us new.** Being made new does not mean that we scrub clean all the blemishes of our lives and our relationships. New doesn’t mean fixed, or set right, or free from error or challenge. New doesn’t mean we’ll never again wonder about who we are on the other side of the sufferings of our lives. For even the resurrected Christ bore the wounds of crucifixion! So too do you and I still inhabit the messy realities of this world.

³ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, p138.

We emerge from the landscape of Lent and the landscapes of our lives with smudges of ashes still on our brows, wounds still threatening to split open with only a word, the crosses we bear ready to have the final say. But the good news we proclaim today is that the One mistaken for the gardener with the dirt from the tomb still under his fingernails is always reaching into the dirty, dark, and dead places of our lives, resurrecting us from the graves into which we are thrust and the graves we dig for ourselves.⁴ This is good news for the streets and the suburbs, good news for the exhausted parent and for the grieving community, good news for those gathered vigil around a beloved one, good news for you and for me.

Easter recalls for me the ancient Japanese practice you've probably seen but not recognized. Called *kintsugi* which literally means 'golden repair,' this ancient practice of repairing broken ceramics with a special lacquer made of gold. In this tradition, pieces of broken cups, plates, bowls, and chalices aren't simply superglued back together, lined with paste and a prayer that no one will notice the crack. But rather, the crack is filled with gold, bringing light into the broken places, illuminating instead of disguising. That philosophy which powers the work is called *wabi-sabi*, which means "to find beauty in broken things or old things."⁵ And in the end, the broken object isn't just repaired but made more beautiful, made whole, made light, made new.

That's what happened one night during Holy Week at a small Lutheran church in the South Bronx, arguably one of the poorest neighborhoods in all

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, p174.

⁵ A story as shared through the On Being blog here: <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-illuminating-the-beauty-in-our-broken-places/#.WO9hG9LTAVk.facebook>

of America. The congregation was filled with those who are all too easily overlooked. And yet on that holy night, something broken was made new.

This ragtag bunch of congregants had decided to reenact the events of Holy Week in what you might call a 'passion play' that night. They recalled Palm Sunday as they marched shouting 'hosanna' in their run-down streets past vacant storefronts and trash overflowing onto the sidewalk. They entered their sanctuary to put Jesus on trial, condemn him to death, and execute him in dramatic fashion. They even made it through that early morning while it was still dark, when a group of women, faithful disciples to our Lord, saw what astounded and terrified them. "He is risen!," they proclaimed with Bronx accents.

This was to be the moment when three members of the congregation were to stand and offer their testimony, bearing witness to the resurrection. Each was to say "I know that he is alive, because..." and fill in with a piece of their own story. Angie was first: "I know that he is alive, because he is alive in me," she said, telling of childhood abuse she had endured in her home, which led to depression, addiction, and an HIV-positive diagnosis. But it was in their scrappy church that she felt seen and known, where the simple combination of hospitality and Bible Study and faithful worship and fellowship among friends led her to consider a call to ministry. "I'm now alive because Jesus Christ lives in and through me!," she proclaimed, her face alight as if she were the first to the tomb.

Two more followed, beginning as instructed with their line and layering their stories onto Angie's with texture and meaning: "I know that he is alive!" That was the moment in the script where the passion play was supposed to

move on, the page turned, onto the next. But somehow that day the testimony would not stop. Spontaneously, men and women stood with their truth, “I know that he is alive,” they cried. Where the world only saw them for how they thought they’d failed – homeless, addicted, jailed, divorced, absent, indifferent, angry, fearful – one after one they proclaimed the gospel truth of about what they had seen and heard, how they had been made new. “For I have seen the Lord!” “Oh, tell it again!”⁶

Friends, Easter is not the end, even though it feels like the destination to which we’ve been racing not just these forty days of Lent, but all the days of our life. The empty tomb in the garden is not where we have arrived, but rather it is the place from which we are sent. For named, claimed, and made new, we must go – for we have a story to tell, again and again and again!

This is not the end. This is only the beginning! Amen.

⁶ Wonderful story shared by Tom Long in his outstanding book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p30-31.