

Easter, 2016
Moving Ladders
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I made a pilgrimage with clergy colleagues to the Holy Land nearly 20 years ago, and of course spent some time at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. That ancient church is built on the site where it is believed Jesus was crucified and buried. If you've been there, you may have experienced it, as I did, as both deeply moving and profoundly off-putting. But what you may not have noticed, unless it was pointed out to you, is something which is visible only from the outdoors. I refer to the ladder which must not be moved.

You heard me. It's an actual ladder made of cedar, propped on a ledge outside of an upper story window. It's been there for a very long time. In fact, it is mentioned in an edict issued in 1757 by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. *The Edict of the Status Quo* is what it is called. The ladder must remain where it is unless representatives from each of the 6 Christian orders agree to it being moved. Actually, the ladder did get moved twice in the last 350 years, both times related to repairs. Both times, moving the ladder caused riots. That is how much Christianity values the status quo.

Of course, we knew that. How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is, "Don't you dare change that lightbulb. My grandmother gave that lightbulb." Nor is Christianity alone in its reverence for maintaining things as they have always been. We could easily make the case from the gospels that Jesus brought about his crucifixion because of how he subverted the religious and political status quo. In the miracles he performed, in his critique of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in eating and drinking with those who were unclean, in forgiving sins, in all of these ways and more, Jesus certainly changed the way things were. Metaphorically speaking, he dared to move the ladder.

And early on that morning of the first day of the week, when Mary Magdalen came to the tomb to weep and to mourn the death of her beloved teacher, she found instead that the tomb was opened and the body of her Lord gone. We can imagine her bewilderment. After all, death is pretty changeless. And yet here, contrary to all reason, contrary to all experience, the tomb was empty. The utter immovability of death itself was no match for the power of the Resurrection.

John tells us that Jesus appeared to her, but she did not recognize him. OK, so her tear-filled eyes and the darkness of the morning conceivably played a role. Still, ought she not to have at least recognized his voice? John the Evangelist seems to be telling us something about the transformative nature of resurrection. What has been is no longer. The familiar is unrecognizable. That which was known becomes new. The power of death itself to lay permanent claim to human life is overturned. Such is the power of resurrection.

And it takes some getting used to. When Mary finally realized that it was the resurrected Jesus with whom she spoke, she moved to embrace him. She believed that he had somehow come back to life, resuscitated, as it were. And why not? Surely she would have remembered how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany mere days earlier. If he had restored Lazarus to his sisters, why wouldn't he restore himself to her and to the others? Of course she moved to embrace him. And Jesus told her not to. I believe he knew that what she wished to embrace was the old life, the life that his death and resurrection had overturned. Resurrection is not resuscitation. This was not Jesus, upgraded to Version 2.0. This was Jesus resurrected.

Which brings me back to the ladder which must not be moved. It is profoundly, maybe even deliciously, ironic that the Church has dug in her heels this way at the place where Jesus relinquished his very life; the place from which the resurrected Jesus sent Mary Magdalene to be an apostle, to proclaim the good news of the resurrection to the disciples locked in the status quo of grief. We can

chuckle at the irony. But we cannot be smug. Most all of us, certainly me, have in our own lives the equivalent of the ladder which must not be moved. Those things we think are vital, that we cannot bring ourselves to relinquish. We confessed some of them on Ash Wednesday. Things like our privilege – our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, our quest for security, our busyness, the facades we wear so that others won't think less of us, our complicity in systems that perpetuate racism and sexism and all of those "isms" that keep neighbor estranged from neighbor. You know. And predictably, the more anxious and overwhelmed we are, the more we want to keep that ladder right where it always has been. Welcome to the human race. When we are fearful, when we are broken down or broken open, when we are grieving or hurting, we are most apt to think that we want most is our old life back.

And what we are given instead is the Resurrection. Newness of life. I'm telling you: when it comes to shattering the status quo, you cannot beat Easter morning. Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Let's move some ladders.