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## *One Wild and Precious Life*

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*John 20:19-31*

In mid-January of this year the poet Mary Oliver died at the age of 82. She came to fame rather late in life, though her obituary in the *New York Times* said that she had the “aura of a reluctant, bookish rock star.”<sup>i</sup> How’s that for an epitaph? “Here lies a reluctant, bookish rock star.”

One of Oliver’s poems entitled “The Summer Day,” has often been quoted as typical of her work. It ends with this musing of what she has seen during a summer day’s walk. She writes,

I do not know exactly what a prayer is,  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me what else should I have done?  
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life.<sup>ii</sup>

In the lesson we read, that is the question that is implicit in this encounter between the risen Jesus and the disciples who are hiding in fear in a closed and locked room. It is the question the disciples must face once they realize that, indeed, God has shined the light of life on the shadow of death, overcome the intensions of evil with the purposes of good. So, the question of Easter Sunday has shifted over a week's time from "Is it true?" to "What should we do now?"

Or as Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

I need to put this in the context of John's larger story so that we can catch its full implication for us. It is Easter night in John's account, and some of the disciples (we do not know how many or which ones), are behind closed doors, locked *because of their fear*, as John puts it.

Actually, more precisely, John says they are hiding because, and let me warn you, this is jarring... hiding because of their *fear of the Jews*. But we know some things about that now. John should have more precisely said that they were afraid of the authorities, the Temple Police, the Sanhedrin, Herod, Caiaphas, or even Pilate whose singular prefect order alone was necessary for the death sentence rendered in this case. Galilee was, after all, an occupied Roman territory where Pax Romana was maintained by Lex Romana, (Roman Law).

John says they were afraid. But who wouldn't be? They had witnessed the crucifixion of their friend and confidant, their teacher and itinerant guide, their rabbi. Having seen what Roman power could do who could blame them for fearing what lay ahead?

They might have been afraid that they would be next, that the same mob that had shouted "Crucify," might come after them as well.

After all, the woman in the courtyard of the high priest had asked Peter, "Weren't you one of his followers?" Who could blame them for fearing the consequences of hanging out with Jesus, so to speak?

And we know that John, the gospel writer, had a thing about blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus, a theological misdirection that led to historical tragedy, influenced Luther's antisemitism, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century contributed in no small part to the Shoah, the extermination of the Jews.

It's not just Jesus' own people who are the reason for the disciples' fear in that closed and locked room on Easter night. Jesus' death and the reports of his resurrection had stirred up all kinds of inner and outer turmoil.

So, I wonder, and won't you wonder with me for a moment, whether the reaction of the disciples to the reports of the women on Easter morning were not so much "Oh joy," but "Oh no."

Maybe what was locked inside of that room was not so much fear of the Jews but fear of the unknown, fear of what was now on the table, the terrible truth that the disciples didn't want to admit.

If Jesus were dead and laid in his tomb, life would be so much easier. They could go back to fishing (any Minnesotan can understand that). They could ignore his call to follow him any further, to bear the good news of God's love expressed in the resurrection. They would not have to risk anything really, just get on with their life, picking up where they left off. And spend their one wild and precious life in a not so wild way.

They could wait until things quieted down, enter some witness protection program, slip out in the dark of some night, and find their way home, returning to whatever they had been doing before. They knew their trades. They still could go back to their day jobs fishing, or tax collecting, or whatever constituted their everyday lives.

But if he were risen, as Mary and the others who had been to the tomb affirmed... well who knows what might happen next? The world would be a place where wild and precious things do happen.

If everything that Jesus had taught them was now in their hands, they had to get to work. There was a lot to do... a message to share, roads to travel, sacrifices to be made, dangers to face, a wild and precious life to live for the sake of something larger than themselves.

No wonder Thomas wanted some empirical evidence with so much at stake. Because not only was Thomas intellectually doubting of this far-fetched story, but he also didn't want to stake his life and his future on the uncertainty of what seemed to him a fantastical story.

"Unless I put my hand in his side and see the print of the nails in his hands, I will not believe," Thomas said. Sounds like something we'd say.

Just for the sake of transparency, let me note for the skeptical that John does not tell us that Thomas actually touched Jesus, only that the risen Lord invited him to do so. And the invitation alone seems to be enough to bring Thomas to faith.

"Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asked Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The story is remembered for the sake of those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Which is good news for us, isn't it?

Almost all of the primary stories of resurrection day are stories in which the disciples are told to stop looking for a body, but rather to find the risen Lord in the midst of life and in more understated ways. Looking directly at the sun is always too bright for the eyes. It best illuminates what is around it. That is a move that is critical to faith.

The point is that if you are trying to travel in a time machine back to Jerusalem to inspect the tomb, or to put your hands in his side or to touch the print of the nails, you are on a futile errand. If you are going

to find him now on this second Sunday of Eastertide, you must look out to the world where he is made evident in those places that are whispering God.

The risen one is, after all, most vivid when we discover that we see him in the familiar things and those discoveries that breathe into us the breath of new life.

Marlon James who lives here in Minneapolis and teaches at Macalester, says, "*Fantastical stories [help us] process the world.*"<sup>iii</sup> It's one of the things I think ancient and present-day African storytelling has known all along... [James goes on,] The [stories]... are what tell us about ourselves... Our minds want the leap.... That brings us closer to reality than reality itself.<sup>iv</sup>

"Have you believed because you have seen?" Jesus asks Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Maybe we might take a little license and say, blessed are those who have not seen and *want* to believe. And that would be a lot of us, wouldn't it?

A new life lay before the disciples because their lives had changed. It was that realization that made them receptive to that which no door can exclude, and no lock can keep out.

A new path lay before them and they must do something about it. They must go forth and live as he had bid them to do, throw themselves so completely into living that in so doing they discovered their one wild and precious life.

I have been fascinated by Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. Don't worry, though, this isn't about politics. Never mind that he is a candidate for President. I'm thinking about his own story as a son, as a gay man, and as a person who has made a personal breakthrough.

I heard an interview on NPR in which he said that he waited to come out until he had been elected mayor of South Bend and following his military deployment to Afghanistan. He said that he had already served in two important roles in his life in which being gay had ruled him out.

As an officer in the Navy and as an elected official in Indiana, "Both roles were strictly incompatible with being out," he said.

Two things changed that for him. Maturity was one. Intellectually and emotionally he realized he couldn't continue to be closeted forever it was taking too much of a toll on his life.

His military service in Afghanistan was the other turning point he experienced. He went on 191 missions outside the line, and he realized in the process that you only get to live one life and be one person. Life is, after all, precious in that way.

He wrote a letter to his parents saying that just in case he didn't come back from war, they should not feel that he had had less of life than if he had lived a longer measure of days.

He felt blessed to own a home, and to have had a splendid education, and to feel that his life had come together. The only thing missing was someone to love. And for him that meant coming out, accepting who he was, and sharing that fact with his parents which he did when he returned from war.<sup>v</sup>

For Pete Buttigieg, breaking out of that locked room where he was hiding and avoiding himself was the only way to embrace his one wild and precious life of God's design.

As I say that, I realize that not everyone enjoys the possibility of seizing life with such freedom. Almost all parents of color must have a talk, a painful talk with their children, about how to act when stopped by authorities, and the importance of doing whatever is necessary to keep the situation from escalating. Pax Romana, after all is enabled by Lex Romana, even when Lex Romana is unjust.

But even those powers that prevent us from fulfilling all that we are and all that we can be are put on warning by the good news of Easter. Easter is, after all, not just one man's triumph over the grave, but the power of God's love overcoming loveless power. As Dr. King and others have said, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. Resurrection is the evidence that justice and hope are vindicated if you can hold it fast.

Sometimes I think our world is full of the love of God, if we will only pay attention.

A child is born and given wrapped in a blanket to a mother's waiting arms, the hard breathing, the pain, exhaustion, and weariness now becoming a moment of tender mercy and quiet rest. *And there it is*, the love of God made real in a child's first breath and love's embrace. A sure sign of a world come alive with God.

You start retirement, and even though you are not quite sure where life is taking you now, you believe in your gut that God has been with you in the past and promises to meet you in whatever lies ahead that even though a door has closed, he comes to us still, a sure sign of a world come alive with God.

For all the cold and snow and arctic blast that comes each winter, why do the bulbs and flowers and trees trust so completely the One who will wake them in the spring... even in Minnesota! A sure sign of a world come alive with God.

Every year at Mac's commencement, I go to an event that falls between baccalaureate and brunch on graduation day. It's an hour's ceremony that I have discovered I don't want to miss. There are perhaps 30 or so students, probably more, who are seated on stage in their cap and gown. This is a group of students who are the first in their family ever to graduate from college.

The audience is composed mostly of parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, some staff of the college who have known these students, Brian Rosenberg our president, Jerry Crawford our trustee chair, and a few hangers on like myself.

Many of the students are international students, though not all. Most of the families are poor, many times only one parent is able to afford to come to St. Paul to see that child, now grown to adulthood, graduate.

These young people are given a couple of minutes to say whatever they would like, in their own language or in English, or both.

And invariably words are said that rise from the heart and that are sincerely spoken. I remember one student last year who said, "I am from Mexico, and I am proud to say so."

A number of students will tell a brief story about their family or refer to an older brother or sister or parent who has sent money each month to help out. Sometimes a student from a poor country like Ethiopia or Nicaragua will speak of her dream to become a doctor, or an engineer, or to serve in her nation's government.

I always take my Kleenex to this service because it is so powerful, so honest and full of gratitude, both to the college and to the families.

It was at this ceremony a couple of years ago that there was a woman in the audience who was Latino and who was trying to listen to what was being said. But she was also trying to manage a child who was probably 7 or 8 years old, a child who had special needs and clearly was unaware that her rather loud vocal sounds were distracting everyone.

At some point, fearing that her child was probably making too much noise, the mother decided to step out of the auditorium.

When her son's turn to speak came, the young man waited until his mother was called back into the room. This young man spoke to his mother, first in Spanish and then he explained in English that his mother had made so many sacrifices to keep him at Mac, even though he had wanted to give up many times, but the inspiration of his mother caring for his little sister, and praying for him, had given him the motivation to keep going on.

All of this he explained through tears and lots of tissues. And I will never forget his closing sentence which was everything that he needed to say, and certainly what must have been all that his mother needed to hear.

Just two words, *Gracias mama*.

What the disciples discovered in that closed and locked room where their greatest fears were gathered was that the world is alive with God, in the sacrifice of a mother to see her son through college, in the way in which the earth springs forth in beauty, the starting of a new season in life that calls forth new ventures as yet to be defined.

The world alive with God... that is what the disciples saw in the face (and hands and side) of a risen Christ. And it's not a bad option for this Second Sunday of Eastertide. Look around you, look ahead of you, look above, below, and behind you. Look who has entered all the locked and lonely places! God is with us, and the world is alive with the signs of God's presence.

Tell me, then, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.

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<sup>i</sup> Margalit Fox, The New York Times, Obituaries, Friday, January 18, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day” Poetry 108: A Poem a Day for American High Schools, Hosted by Billy Collins.

<sup>iii</sup> Marlon James, paraphrase. Marlon James: Epic Storyteller. Macalester Today magazine, Winter 2019, p. 21

<sup>iv</sup> James

<sup>v</sup> Pete Buttigieg, NPR, The New Yorker Radio Hour, 4/5/19