



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Passing through” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

April 28, 2019; Second Sunday in Easter

Reading: Luke 24:13-35; “Not at our beck and call” by Walter Brueggemann in *Awed to heaven; Rooted to Earth*

Do you ever think about words and their origin? I do. I’m interested in words like Easter for this time of year. Romance languages call it *pascoa* or *paques*. We see this in English in the adjective about this time of year: paschal. Apart from that, Germanic languages link it to *Ostara*, the pre-Christian goddess of the dawn to whom April was dedicated. I find it fascinating that we made that choice rather than adopting the Greek *pascha*. It reminds me how language is living, it evolves. Another word associated with this time of year is “passion”. Ask someone on the street what it means and most associate it with sex. A few may think about something to which they are committed. But only in church do we hear “passion” and think Jesus. We know it’s about the cross, but few can say why.

So what’s the connection? Passion comes from *passio*, Latin for “to suffer.” Definitely not what we usually think about, but it does connect to the end of Jesus’ life. And to passion as something you’re committed to. People speak of suffering for a cause. Jesus’ passion for G-d’s vision for the world and all of us led him to the cross. His accepting *passio* made the dawning of Easter possible. Passion and resurrection definitely go together. Yet our instinct is for them not to.

That’s the tone the gospel opens with. Cleopas and his companion are leaving Jerusalem, and the rest of the disciples. Given the events, this is time for solidarity not separation. But they head out of town. They’re distraught. As an unrecognized Jesus comes along and asks them what they’re debating about, they reveal their depth of despair: “We had hoped he was the One…” Their understanding of the Messiah and how he’d bring redemption didn’t include suffering. Ours doesn’t really either, at least not our own. Walter Brueggemann’s prayer captures this. We want a deity to behave according to our expectations. One expectation is that suffering and a good deity are mutually exclusive. How often do you hear the continued existence of suffering as the reason someone rejects the existence of the divine? Now please don’t misunderstand me. Suffering is not good. If we have the chance to lift it, we should, mobilizing to help like the response to rising rivers, and to bring an end to hate like we saw in yet another synagogue shooting. But we can’t avoid it either. Pain and death are part of our world, and the redemptive path. Resurrection comes through the cross, not in spite of it.

Given the association of the word “paschal” with Jesus’ death and resurrection you would think the word comes from *passio* but its root is *pesach*, Passover. There is a sacrificial element in the killing of lambs in the Temple but the foundational story is the journey from slavery, including movement through the sea, to freedom. This liberation story includes trials in the Sinai but that’s not where they stay; they make it to the Promised Land. This is foundational for us too. When we celebrate baptism, remembered today as we welcomed Nancy into our community, a prime part is retelling the Exodus. And so another word that goes with paschal is *transitus*, passing through.

Now this may sound like semantics but it's critical for our gospel story, and our own. In the story the Risen Christ helps the two disciples see the role of suffering in his redemptive work. The key is in the last line of Brueggemann's prayer: "fleshed presence in suffering love." In the cross we see Jesus as an icon of the divine accepting the fullness of humanity, including death. He doesn't take it away but transforms it. As he suffers with us, he shows us how death and life are the same reality, a cosmic pattern of life giving way to death, and new life emerging. Other faith traditions teach this too. Buddhism clearly states that "life is suffering" – and counterintuitively it's in accepting suffering that it ceases. It's about letting go of attachment to how we think life should be. In the embrace of what's unfolding, we make space for something new to rise.

The key is the idea of *transitus*, of passing through. It's what we see the Risen One doing as he walks the way to Emmaus. He joins the companions in their grief and suffering. He doesn't question or judge. He acknowledges what they are feeling, the angst of their "We had hoped..." He is present, joined in their feelings rather than lifting them. That's the only way they'll get to resurrection. Anyone whose loved one has died, or experienced the kind of losses so many are, even as I speak, knows well that healing only comes by passing through the sorrow. There are days all you want to do is pull the blankets over your head and will the world to stop. In those moments you don't need the pressure of those who expect you to quickly get back to normal and move on. You never really do. It's why stories of the Risen One make clear he has wounds. But the loss over time becomes a scar and not a wound. Over time you learn to walk with the grief, knowing that a broken heart only comes to one who loves.

And love is the other key. As I read the story, an element that stands out is relationship. As Jesus breaks open the scriptures and breaks the bread, he helps them see they are not alone. He helps them see that their story is part of a much larger narrative extending back in time, but more than that he helps them see they are part of a community. Consider the story's structure: the disciples share their concerns, scriptures are explained, bread is broken, and they go share what happened. This is the structure of worship. Beyond the tale of two disciples this is Luke's community. They understood that as Jesus was joined to them, so they were joined to each other in his redemptive work. This continues to be the case. We need each other. All of us experience *passio* in our lives, sometimes one experience after another. Some may come because of our commitment to G-d's vision for the world. But through the compassion we share we do pass through sorrow into new life.

I realize much of my reflection takes us back to Good Friday rather than Easter. How can it not, given the events in our world? Besides, Easter is *pascha*. The suffering of Good Friday is part of the Easter story, a reminder that death and life, cross and resurrection are two sides of one reality. But we are not alone in this. Joined in community, Christ walks with us. In suffering love, we pass through it together. Amen.