

Sermon: Easter Sunday  
Text: John 20:1-14

Nearly fifty years after World War II, the poet Czeslaw Milosz put his pen to paper and set down in writing some of the thoughts of that experience that no amount of time had been able to quell. He had been a resistance fighter in Poland and had witnessed first-hand the violent repression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. He had watched the destruction of his country by German soldiers who cared about nothing but the spoils of war that they could laughingly carry off with them, and he saw the swift and terrible bending of every power to the devastation of anonymity: whole cities were flattened, neighbors were indiscriminately lined up for execution, millions were deported. It was as if everything had turned to indifference. Innumerable lives were lost. They were vanquished, wiped even from memory. For what we know now about the war are primarily statistics, dates, places, and battles: four hundred thousand Americans, six million Jews, twenty million Soviets, Normandy, Auschwitz, Stalingrad, Hiroshima. Such generalization makes history manageable. It also makes it bearable, something that can be taught and learned in abstraction, removed by the distance of time, the distance of change and progress, the distance of faded memories that smooth out the sharp pain of war's atrocities.

But there is something haunting about life that, finally, does not remit to such generalization. Life never occurs in general. It arises in the singularity of persons, in individuals who have proper names, who inhabit specific houses, whose whole identity is irreducibly particular. And thus, when, at long last, Milosz chose to record what he remembered, he wrote about what haunted him still.

"Still in my mind," he began, "[I'm] trying to save Miss Jadwige,  
A little hunchback, a librarian by profession,  
Who perished in the shelter of an apartment house  
That was considered safe but toppled down  
And no one was able to dig through the slabs of wall,  
Though knocking and voices were heard for many days.  
So a name is lost for ages," Milosz sighed, "[a name is lost] forever.  
No one will know about her last hours,  
Time carries her in layers of Pliocene...  
The little skeleton of Miss Jadwiga, the spot  
Where her heart was pulsating. This only," Milosz declared,  
[this only] I set against [all] necessity, [all] law, [all] theory."

It's a statement worthy of Easter – bold, provocative, uncompromising, sharply defined by intensely human remembering. This one life, this one death, this event, this insignificant person, he insisted. All the war's numbers and measures, multiplied by factors of millions still cannot match, he contended, the poignancy of this one individual's tragic end, buried beneath the rubble of our faceless, anonymous animosities. Miss Jadwiga, he countered, a little hunchback, a librarian by profession. Fifty years later, haunted, Milosz's pen turned specifically to her.

Two thousand years have only magnified the same issue for us in regard to Jesus. The Easter story is well worn. Its surprise is gone, as well as its astounding disruption of all that we would and can reasonably expect. Instead of registering astonishment or dismay, all of its own sharp edges have been smoothed out into numerous more fashionable generalizations. Jesus' resurrection has ceased to be an event, singular and stupendous, and has become a broad theory instead, a speculation about what awaits all of us after death. Resurrection has become an abstract term that we contemplate,

wondering if, in fact, we can believe that it legitimately applies to us or if it meets our own criteria of plausibility. We have re-interpreted it as a consoling myth and an inspiring metaphor for the resilience of life. We have used it as a helpful balm in times of tragedy and as a way to name the vague hope we have that our own death will not mean our complete extinction – that something of us must continue, in some manner, however meagerly we picture this continuance.

But this is not what John, or any of the other Gospel writers set down. Their testimony was entirely particular. Jesus was not a type or a figure or an example. He was an individual, publicly crucified between two thieves, whose death was utterly final, whose grave was sealed with the permanence of an immovable stone. His demise meant his elimination, or, as all the authorities wished and expected, his being completely forgotten, one more name lost for the ages, lost forever. No theory could change this nor any hopeful projection nor any cleverly crafted attempts at revisionist history. There is nothing natural about resurrection. There is no way to make it sensible or reasonable or a commonplace expectation, as if it must simply follow death. There is no way to subject it to testing or scrutiny. It was strictly and uniquely the act of God on Jesus' behalf, well outside our capacity to comprehend or explain it or fit it within our own measures of evaluation. Jesus' death we can understand. It was very much our own doing. Elimination of foes is still our impulse and our strategy and, sometimes, our policy yet. But resurrection lies beyond all possibility. It is exclusively God being God – to which the disciples could only be witnesses; witnesses and then ambassadors, for they were then given the message that this act is a promise that encompasses us all. This event, this resurrection of Jesus, the particular spot where his skeleton was laid, where that very specific stone was rolled away, this, they proclaimed is what we, in turn, as Christians set firmly against all necessity, all law, all theory.

Easter is not an answer to any question. In point of fact, it sets itself against all answers, because, in the face of actual persons, of any life lived and each death suffered, answers ring hollow. They fall to stuttering words and frail sentiments. What we are given, instead, is a name, and what we are shown in Jesus is not an answer but the magnitude and intimacy of God's devotion that comes without condition and without limit – all the power of the divine bending to the smallest and the least, to even that one that no one would remember or deem worthy. Miss Jadwiga, a little hunchback, a librarian by profession, in him the stone behind which she died is rolled away too. As is the stone of all the world's vast indifference. Resurrection has interrupted our deepest resignations and our darkest shadows. And joy arises in every place where any proper name is mentioned because God, in infinite love, has claimed each one of us.

In the first light of Easter on that first day, what had happened was not made clear until Jesus turned to Mary and called her by name. And she, recognized by him, recognized him in all his fullness: "Rabboni," she said. This is the relationship God has established with us, with directness, persistence, and grace. And we, in turn, may, therefore, love one another with similar intensity and abandon and undiminished delight, for nothing of us will pass away. Called by name, God will raise us to fullness, too.

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