

EASTER AS HOMECOMING

JOHN 20:1-18

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One of the oldest symbols for the church is a boat. On Easter, however, one colleague prefers the church as a jumbo jet. All around the world today, churches fill with people of every race, age, and circumstance – like passengers boarding a great ark of an airliner.ⁱ

A child speaking three languages sits ahead of us. Gays sit next to straights on the jumbo jet – the love of Jesus will make room for them all. A family of five occupies the middle seat, all from Cairo, all playing cards and giggling. The boys are poking one another. Some of the passengers have just discovered they have cancer. Others have been beaten by their spouse the night before. Still others have discovered marijuana in their children's sneakers.

And where is this global jumbo jet taking us on Easter Sunday? Home, of course. Home is the place we long for and seek to return to. Home is where you hang your hat. Home is the place on this Sunday – if not every Sunday – we are in search of when we come to church.

There is so much that causes homelessness in our world today. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, after listing some of the great heroes of Scripture, writes, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar...as if they were strangers and exiles on earth. For those who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.”ⁱⁱ

I finally saw the movie *In America*. If you haven't seen it I highly recommend that you do. It is the true story of a family who, for all practical purposes, is homeless. They come from Ireland through Canada. They are poor. They even stopped, I understand, here in Buffalo for a few days at Vincent O'Neill's of the Irish Classical Theatre before making their way at last to New York City.

Sitting there in the theater you don't know why they have come to America unless it is like so many before them – to find a home, to make a home, to get a fresh start. Left behind in Ireland is the still warm grave of their young son Frankie who died, we learn, of cancer and a terrible fall.

Not only is this family homeless, they are each of them estranged from one another. Oh they get along well enough. But it is, we learn, Frankie's death that has broken each of them. The mother who blames herself, the father who doesn't allow himself to feel anything, the oldest sister who is wed to a camcorder as if capturing it on video she will have it forever, and the youngest sister who just misses home, as she tells her father.

“This is our home,” he says. “No it isn't,” she says. “Why?” he asks. “Because you never play with me anymore,” she replies. “My sister never talks to me. I can't tell anyone my problems. And Frankie isn't here.”

A. Bartlett Giamatti says there is really no equivalent in other languages for the English word 'home.' No translation catches the associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security and autonomy and accessibility, the freedom from wariness that all cling to the word home.ⁱⁱⁱ

Homer's *Odyssey* is perhaps the oldest story of longing and searching for home. In that great classic home is a concept as much as a place.

The journey for home is, says Homer, about rejoining a beloved, rejoining parent to child, rejoining a land to its rightful owner or ruler. The journey for home is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. It is about restoration of the right relations among things – and going home is where that restoration occurs because that is where it matters most.

Bart Giamatti after he was Professor of Medieval Studies then President of Yale served as Commissioner of Baseball. He said it's not surprising that in the game of baseball there are four bases and the last one, the one that makes all the difference in the game, is called 'home.' "We don't know where fourth base got its name," he says. "But in a nation of immigrants flooding into America – people who had left one home for another – at the same time the game was being invented, it should come as no surprise."^{iv}

In today's story Mary Magdalene is the first one to reach the tomb of Jesus and the last one to leave. When she sees the stone is rolled away, she runs to tell the others then returns with them.

Peter and the beloved disciple rush to the tomb to confirm the startling news. Though they do not conclude resurrection. The overwhelming truth of it unfolding before their eyes – that he was raised from the dead – will take time to grasp. So the other disciple who saw and believed, yet did not understand, and Peter, who is, surprise – clueless – return to their homes.

But not Mary. So distraught is she you get the sense she has no home or if she does it's not one to which she wants to return. Convinced they have taken his body she stays at the tomb and weeps. Then an angel asks why she is weeping. When she tells of her despair Jesus appears, though she does not recognize him. Thinking him the gardener she asks where they have taken him at which point Jesus calls her name, "Mary." "Rabboni!" she responds in wonder and recognition.

That, it seems to me, is as much as anything, a story of homecoming. Maybe you have had the experience, anticipating being reunited with a loved one, wondering if you would recognize them or not.

A long lost relative coming to visit. A hospitalized spouse ravaged by illness. Or a teenager after she finds new "friends."

I remember coming home the first time from college. It was in the days when long hair on men was a sign of rebellion and nonconformity (though I think more of the men on our campus had long hair than not – we were not such brave nonconformists as we thought). I will never forget walking into our living room at home, my grandmother – a very proper southern lady – was there. She looked at me like she had never seen me before. Startled, distraught, hurt. She said, as if speaking to a stranger, "You are no grandson of mine!" Before I returned to college that weekend, I am glad to say, that with some penance, I became again the apple of her eye. She recognized the real me at last and accepted me again.

The last Mary had seen Jesus his body was tortured and broken and lifeless. She did not expect to see him ever again, let alone hear his familiar voice calling out to comfort her.

Which is precisely why I believe this is a story of homecoming. Home is not only that place where, like the little girl from Ireland says, people listen to you, play with you and talk to you. Home is not only the place, as Homer says, where at long last after our wandering and wondering we come to realize who we are and find peace within our selves.

The message of Easter tells us as well as finding ourselves and each other home is where we find Christ. Home is where Christ is.

The good news of Easter is that finally, in Jesus, God brings us back. Home at last. It's why Jesus told his friends at the Last Supper, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also...I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

The Bible is one long story of our homelessness. First we left the garden of paradise. Then we wandered forty years in the wilderness. We thought we found home when our ancestors built a mighty nation. We longed for home when we were taken in exile. But every time we thought we found home we realized something was missing.

St. Augustine put it this way, he said, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord."

There is so much in this world that causes homelessness. Broken dreams and relationships; broken health and hearts; broken societies and laws; war.

I know that all homes are not even sometimes ideal. And, there is no one home that is completely perfect. But still that's the home we long for.

Death is the ultimate source of our lostness and loneliness. But the good news of God's raising Jesus from the grave means that the power of death that separates us from God and one another is no longer able to keep us from being at home in this world. Our relationship to God and one another has been restored. We need never be homesick or homeless again.

And because Jesus was raised there is a homecoming in heaven awaiting you and me just as there was our loved ones who were greeted after they left us in this world.

I don't know exactly what it will be like. But I do believe the homecomings we have experienced here can give us a hint.

Like the time, four years ago, we sent our youngest son away to a wilderness program. I share this today with his permission. He was a little like that prodigal in the biblical story.

He wasn't at home even at home. He wasn't at home with himself or others. And we weren't at home either. Much of the time our house didn't feel like a home.

Something, we knew, was missing.

So one day with a great deal of courage and angst we said to him, "this cannot be your home right now." And we sent him away to North Carolina – a place where he learned slowly to find himself again. Learned how to be at home with himself and others.

It wasn't easy. He was in that wilderness, deep in the Smoky Mountain National Forest, for thirty-seven days with seven other kids like him and two adults.

We hadn't seen or talked to him in two months. When we arrived the night before our reunion the program leaders explained to us parents how powerful the reuniting would be. How healing. How renewing.

So early the next day we gathered our gear and hiked a mile into the forest. Our plan was to meet our youngsters who had been making their way for the past week out of the mountains. The plan was to reconnect on the trail and spend a solo together for the night – with our son showing us how to survive in the wild.

At first we heard them, then saw the single line of dirty, glowing, robust kids coming toward us down the trail. That's when everyone broke ranks – kids and parents – just running toward one another.

The three of us embraced for a long time without any words and lots of tears. We didn't need to say anything. When I looked into my son's eyes I saw the boy I thought I had lost. In fact, as we looked into one another's faces the three of us were powerfully bonded together in the joy of recognition – like Mary's joy that first Easter. I thought of Jesus' famous parable of that runaway boy and the woman who swept her house until she found the pearl of great price. When a relationship is restored and things are right again, Christ is present. Right there, deep in another state, we were home at last.

I believe for God's Easter people that's what happens when the great jumbo jet lands and we disembark today to gather here, in our church home, at the Lord's Table to find Christ.

And I believe that's what *will* happen when we meet our loved ones again in heaven, the arms of the Resurrected Christ himself encircling us.

So come, the great cloud of witnesses is about us. Christ is at table.

Let us keep the homecoming feast! Amen.

ⁱ Donna Schaper, "Preaching to the Easter-only Crowd," Zion's Herald, Volume 178, Issue 2, March/April 2004, p.7.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections, (New York: Harper and Row, 1996). An exquisite collection of personal/biblical/theological meditations on the theme of the title.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Bartlett Giamatti, "The Story of Baseball: You Can Go Home Again," The New York Times, April 2, 1989, p. 10 (Sports)

^{iv} Giamatti.