

Staggered Vision

James Alison

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[...]

Staggered Vision. It's what we get today in the gospel. In order to begin to make sense of what must be one of the most mysterious passages of writing anywhere, I'd like to try and fill in some of the background context. The background context is best known as Holy Saturday, one of my favourite days of the year. We had it yesterday. I think it's my favourite day of the year because I'm essentially lazy, and it's the day when God rests. All the readings and psalms are about God resting. And the reason why God rests is because on Good Friday he accomplished everything, he finished creation. He entered into death and made it untoxic. So on Holy Saturday a great quietness is over the earth, because of course, no-one else knows about this yet. It's the great quietness of creation having been completed, of death no longer being the enemy of the creatures, but something that can be lived through and in, as part of being a creature. It's death occupied by God. It's where he fulfils what he says in Isaiah 25, which we get to hear echoes of in today's gospel.

And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever. (Is 25:7)

It's an interesting image, isn't it, "swallowing up death". Other images are "dwelling in death"; other images are "harrowing hell". Those are phrases which we hear associated with Holy Saturday. God, at peace with the dead, being able to summon them out. But of course no-one knew this on Holy Saturday, the original Holy Saturday. We know it because of the resurrection and of the apostolic witness. But no-one knew it on that Saturday. No-one knew what the peace of the earth was. God having entered into death, and detoxified it, so that the whole of creation could be brought alive. No-one knew that the first day of the week was, in fact, going to be the first day of creation, which is where we start with John's

gospel. All the effort was Jesus's effort, to enter into death for us, so as to occupy it and make it non-toxic. And then the rest, the peace, was on Saturday.

We're left with this strange phenomenon which is that on Easter Sunday there's no story to tell. That's very odd. We're used to stories that end with death. We understand stories that end with death. That's why, if you like, it's easier to celebrate Good Friday than it is to celebrate Easter Sunday, because Good Friday has an end of the story, just like CSI Miami, or whatever. All these things have ends. They fit into patterns which we know. There is good. There is bad. There are just rewards and not-so-just rewards, but the story comes to an end. But what's mysterious about today's gospel is that it's the beginning of a storyless world, where there is no fixed story. And one of the reasons for that is that this is the storyless world which is emerging from death being non-toxic, from death not being the usual parameter. And that means that all the fault lines, as it were, by which we tell stories, have, kind of, gone fuzzy, and it's not really clear how we would tell a story. We can tell stories when they are about revenge, when they're about reward. Telling a story of gratuity coming from nothing at all is terribly, terribly difficult. As many of us know it's much easier to be reactive than it is to be creative. But this is the beginning of the story that comes from creation which doesn't know death, which means that all our scripts, all our librettos, don't really work. So we have the rather mysterious phenomenon of people staggering around in the dark, not really knowing what's going on. That's why I talk about staggered vision. It's staggered in several senses.

The first sense of staggered vision is that, as we go through the gospel, you'll see that it's only little by little that the various characters start to get some sense of sight. It's as if they've been given a new set of spectacles, and their eyesight is all woozy, and only very gradually is it going to come into focus. And we'll watch that process going on. So that's one reason why it's staggered – because each little incident is the opening up of more sight, into something that can't, properly speaking, be seen. That's the first sense of staggered vision.

The second sense is “staggered” in the more usual “surprised” sense. How could one's vision be anything other than staggered at the little signs beginning to emerge of a story that we can't tell, we don't know how to tell, because it doesn't fit into any of our patterns of beginnings and endings?

So there are these two sorts of staggering-ness going on. The staggering-ness which emerges from death having quietly, peacefully, without a shout, become non-toxic; and the results of that beginning to emerge into history. And second is the sense of the strange alteration of lenses as the people begin to see. Let's follow them. And let's notice two things that, in the gospel story which you've just heard, whenever people try to do something, they screw up. Whenever they're lonely, sad or frightened, then the risen Lord comes towards them.

So the first thing that happens is that Mary goes to the tomb, Mary Magdalene. It's still dark, just becoming to become light, and she sees that the stone is away, the stone has been taken away. So she comes to the obvious conclusion:

They have taken away the Lord. (John 20:2)

So she goes and tells the disciples that this is what has happened. And they come running, full of decision, impetus. The guys are going to take charge, you know, standard stuff, come running. Of course John is a little younger than Peter, so he gets there first. But he stops. He has to stoop to look in, he doesn't go in. It's curious. I wonder why he doesn't go in. Do you think it's because he would be impure? It may be that. Or it may be that he's aware that he's not the High Priest, and only the High Priest should go into the holy place. So he waits for Peter, who is the High Priest, and the High Priest can go into the holy place. But he sees something first, John sees something first. He sees the linen shrouds left there, just peaceful and at rest, the shrouds in which Jesus had been wrapped, the sign of death, the sign of death left behind. So he doesn't quite know what to make of that. He doesn't yet see the napkin.

Peter comes in. The High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, and sees the napkin. We call it a napkin. Actually, it was more like a veil. It was a cloth put over the person's face when they died. And here it is, put to one side, wrapped up neatly, and gently left to one side - nothing accidental - deliberately, politely, left to one side. What do you think it is, what is this veil that has been put to one side? Is it the same veil that we heard from Isaiah? Is it the veil that Moses had to cover his face with when he came out to see people, and that he would put aside when he went in to talk to the Lord? When he was with the Lord he didn't need a veil. But such was the power of life that the people were frightened when he would come out with his face glowing, so he would cover his face with a veil, because they couldn't stand seeing him face to face. The leaving aside of the napkin suggests that there can be some face-to-face going on that hasn't

been possible before. So Peter goes in. He takes note. John also then goes in,

and seeing, he believes. (John 20:8)

That's one of the mysterious lines of this gospel. "And seeing, he believed." It doesn't say what he believed. It just says "seeing, he believed." It's interesting that after it says "seeing, he believed", it says:

For as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (John 20:9)

So whatever it was that he believed, it was pretty uninformed. It really hadn't occurred that this was about Jesus rising from the dead, but that he was not there, that he was not to be found among the dead, and that the holy place appeared to have been emptied out. We're probably only beginning to get some sight of that, because it wasn't really until Mary Magdalene that they really worked out that it really was the holy place.

Then the most staggering line of the gospel. These are typical guys, getting it wrong – yet again. They went, they saw, they inspected. And then – they went home. That's exactly what it says.

Then the disciples went back to their homes. (John 20:10)

What did they do the rest of the morning? We don't know. "They went back to their homes." In other words, their very proactive attempt to go out, all they could certify was that he had risen. There was no sense of them being able to be approached by the One who had been doing something. They were still in active mode, so they were not yet able to undergo something.

But Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside. She was clever. She knew her Isaiah. And she knew that that the next bit after "he will swallow up death for ever" is:

and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. (Is 25:8)

So it was a sensible thing for her to be doing, standing outside, saying: "Here I am, waiting here, waiting for the tears to be wiped away". And as she wept, she stoops to look into the tomb. Do you remember what it was that she saw when she looked into the tomb? She saw the place where they laid him, with the cloths, *and* two angels.

So you see, our staggered vision: it starts with just the beloved disciple seeing the shroud; and then St. Peter and the beloved disciple seeing the shroud and the napkin; and then Mary Magdalene seeing what? The Holy of Holies, she saw the cherubim throne, the mercy seat, where God was no longer. She saw the two angels either side of the place where he was laid. It would have been instantly recognizable as the mercy seat which hadn't been in the temple, wasn't in the second temple. It was the place where God was amongst people. All this is John's way of telling us the same as what St. Matthew tells us about:

the veil of the temple was ripped in two. (Matt 27:51)

John tells it slightly differently. Mary Magdalene looks in and she sees the Holy of Holies. And the angels say:

Why are you weeping? (John 20:13)

The angels are inside the tomb. Notice how careful John is with his movements. The angels say "Why are you weeping?", and so she repeats her line about them having taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have placed him. And then a voice comes from *behind* her, (Please notice, *not* from the tomb, from *behind* her) saying:

Why are you weeping? (John 20:15)

Because God is not to be found in the tomb. The Holy of Holies is now open. Anyone can go in. Holiness has spread out. The place of the creator has irrupted back into the world.

So she turns round, and who does she see? Well, it's got to be one of two people. It's either Yahweh or Adam, Adam being the gardener. Because Yahweh walks in the garden in the cool of the day. And so did Adam. She would have to be Eve. So it's got to be one of the two. So, safe bet, go for Adam. Meeting Yahweh is more trouble. So she, imagining him to be the gardener, explained her problem. But she still didn't recognize him.

"Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener she said to him "Sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus said to her "Mary". (John 20:15-16)

That's the first moment of real contact. She turned and said to him in Hebrew:

“Rabbuni”, which means “my master”. (John 20:16)

So for the first time in this story someone has actually been addressed by someone else at the level of their being. In fact, they've been spoken into being. And at last she instantly knows by whom she has been addressed. It's one of the great magic moments where the real protagonist emerges, not from the tomb. Just think, think about how much time and energy we spend thinking about the tomb as being a place from which Jesus emerged, whereas the whole point is that in the gospel accounts the empty tomb is a place into which people look by mistake. Because Jesus is in fact behind, he is somewhere else completely, not quite recognisable. And he speaks her into being, which is the magic moment, the beginning of recreation on the first day. This is Yahweh in the garden calling forth by name.

“Do not hold me for I have not yet ascended to the father. But go to my brethren and say to them that I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17)

These words seem so familiar to us that we forget that in St. John's gospel Jesus never refers to the disciples as brethren except here. It's only after the resurrection that he talks about them as “my brethren”. And he never refers to God as “my God and your God” in St. John's gospel, except here. And this is because he has tasted death, he has dwelt in death, so he has become the first of many brothers. Before, he hadn't yet become the great High Priest, who was able to unensnarl all his brothers and sisters from their sins. It was only in his death that he was made perfect, as the epistle to the Hebrews says. It was by entering into death, and tasting death for them, that he became the brother, and it is only therefore here that, as part of the new creation, he's able to say, “Go tell my brethren.”

“My God and your God.” (John 20:17)

Something new has been created, a new form of relating that didn't exist before, because God has dwelt in death and made it non-toxic.

So Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” (John 20:18)

And now, no doubt, she addressed him as Rabbuni but she referred to him as Adonai, Yahweh.

And she told them that he had said these things to her.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Judeans, Jesus came and stood among them. (John 20:18-19)

At last they were in a position where they could undergo something. When they had been in macho, proactive, sort-it-all-out mode, they couldn't undergo anything. It's only in their place of fear, just as it had been for Mary only in the place of weeping, that the creator who had been reaching through a field of vision formed by death, showing signs of who he was, was able to come into their midst and get through to them, bringing them peace. And very shortly what he will do is he will:

breathe upon them. (John 20:22)

Except that's what it says in our translations. The actual term is not "breathe upon them". Do you know what it is? He breathes *into* them, a bit like CPR. Except that the word in Greek is the same as what God did to Adam.

He breathed into his nostrils and gave him life. (Gen 2:7)

So it is the creator coming forth to bring to life that which had been dead, that which had been snarled up, that which had been bound to futility. All of that is being opened up by the creator coming from exactly the place where he is not expected, only able to come in where people are not so busy running the show that they're incapable of undergoing, and enabling them to be brought into the new creation, and become the spreaders of it, by undoing the way in which we are all bound into death with each other. That, I think, is the grace of dwelling in the non-toxicity of death, which is what Our Lord has given us, and which we have so beautifully just celebrated in a baptism.