



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Over the past 29 years as a priest, I have developed an unusual practice for developing my sermons. I begin first by reading the gospel pretty closely and seeing where in that gospel message there is some tension, or something that I've missed in the past, or something that needs to be lifted up, or an enduring question that I have.

And then I begin to pray and I begin to think about art. And the art that I'm looking for when I'm praying through a text, it's not merely an illustration of what's going on in the text. I'm not looking for, for example, a painting of Jesus washing His disciples' feet when the text is about Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

What I'm looking for is a painting or a piece of art that actually creates a conversation across difference with the text. Because when you have that incredible dialogue and you hear those different voices speaking to each other, all of a sudden things change. And I see the art differently and I see the text differently. And if I do it really well, the sermon just falls into place.

So the art that I kept thinking about as I was praying through this reading from the Gospel of Mark was Jay DeFeo's incredible piece entitled *The Rose*. This is a piece of art that I have on your bulletin and those of you at home can see right next to me. It's about 11 feet tall and it weighs over a ton. And DeFeo, who was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, and then went to San Francisco and got radicalized and had fun with the Beat Generation in the 1950s, she began to build this painting from 1959 to 1966 in an apartment that her husband and she lived in, in San Francisco.

And what she did is she applied layer upon layer of paint. And then she would carve the paint so that it began to take on the shape of a kind of bas-relief or a sculpture. Right? And she worked on it for seven years. And you could see a picture of her on the last page of the bulletin or right before you right now, where it has a picture of her working on *The Rose* in 1960. And there she is looking all the world to me like a young Claire Danaher the first time I saw her performing in a cafe and fell in love, because she is so focused, so beautifully determined, so centered on her practice that she doesn't even know how beautiful she is or how beautiful the painting is. She is just lost in the artistic practice.

But going back to *The Rose*, it's one of the most amazing pieces of art that we have. DeFeo was a member of the Beat Generation. She was part of the Beat Movement, and this was the early movement of people who began to question some of the ways in which American culture had evolved as a result of the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Cold War. She found and they found that all of the attempts to somehow create a small piece of prosperity for everyone was not somehow addressing the deeper disease and the deeper tensions and the deeper trauma in the society around them.

And they began to raise images of movement and flight and thought and being on a journey because they wanted to invite the American people to go a bit deeper. And people have since criticized them for being naive, both on the left and on the right, but I find that their work is profound. Yes, they might have been naive. They might have been like fish complaining about the water, but that doesn't mean they weren't right. They believed that there were seeds in the American culture that could somehow help them grow its renewal, and that was an incredible witness to the rest of us and something that we can all hope for, immersed as we are now in a time of tremendous tension and conflict and polarization.

And DeFeo, when she started working on this painting, initially called it *The Death Rose*, and it was meant to be entirely black with all of those petals in the background. But as she began to construct the painting, she kept on adding lighter and lighter pigment until she was working with white. And there is a moment in which this painting stopped testifying to just death, but also to the life that comes after death.

The painting was not so much finished as abandoned. DeFeo and her husband got evicted from their apartment in San Francisco. And they had to get it removed, but it was too large at that point to get out of any door. So they had to cut out some wall around a window, which I'm sure pleased the landlord to no end. And they took it out with a crane. And then it went down to a showing in Southern California and then it was acquired by the San Francisco Art Institute. And they didn't know quite what to do with it, so they put it in a conference room behind a wall. They put plaster all around it, and they covered it up for decades until Jay DeFeo, who died in 1989, early, at 60 years old from cancer, she suddenly had a kind of revival of her work, and the Whitney Museum asked and acquired it in 1995 and literally excavated it and brought it to New York.

So this painting has gone through its own death and resurrection. It's gone through this moment where it was created in secret and then somehow was lost and then found. It somehow saw darkness and then light. It went through its own transformation even in the message it spoke.

DeFeo was one of those people who didn't give interviews about her work. She was a true artist. She invited you to interpret what you saw. But of course, I found an interview she gave in 1975 and I found out about her practice. She said that she drew from three sources of inspiration. The first was primitivism, and by that she meant not some kind of return to Aboriginal practices, but she meant letting wood be wood, letting metal be metal, letting paint be paint. She actually painted for many years with tempera rather than acrylic. It meant getting back to the source of things.

She also drew from abstract expressionism because that was a movement in which painters and artists began to question how we receive a work or interact with a work, and not just whether the work said a message or not. The message was what you saw in it. This is why Jackson Pollock would throw the paint at the canvas. And the third, which was most interesting to me is she was inspired by the Renaissance. She was inspired by the time she spent in Florence. And when she was in Florence, she was moved by all the crucifixes, and so a lot of her art has a cross in it. There is this symbol of triumph over violence and a kind of reaching forward to a transcendent point.

And the Renaissance, for her, was not just the recovery of techniques from antiquity. The Renaissance for her went to the core of what it meant, which is *renasce* in Latin, which means not only rebirth but to rise again. The Renaissance, in other words, was more than just the recovery of the ability of artists to create art that reflected real bosoms and real curves and perspective. The Renaissance was an attempt to see God's work reconciling and redeeming and rebirthing all that is human. The Renaissance was not an attempt to escape art or to liberate art from religion. It was an attempt to liberate religion itself, a spirituality that was powerful, that had been hidden.

So with that quick sketch of the art that has inspired me and sharing it with you, I turn to today's gospel because in today's gospel you have this incredible, almost modernistic portrayal of the resurrection. Mark is the most brief gospel account. It only goes for 16 chapters. And the resurrection for Mark leaves a lot of space. It's been said of Mark that he wrote everything that he thought was necessary. He took out every word that he thought wasn't necessary, and then he took out a few more. And that is meant because Mark trusts the reader. Mark took out all of those words because he wanted the reader to interact with the text and to see what is going on.

And the same thing went on in DeFeo's *The Rose*. No one could call this a rose, but they could see that kind of transcendent appeal that you could find in a rose, that kind of invitation to go deeper and higher. So are we invited to go deeper and higher today in this text.

The second thing that we see in the reading is that there is this moment of eternity. By that I mean that people have criticized the Gospel of Mark, because in it you have this strata of the tradition that says that Jesus is going to meet the disciples in Galilee, but other accounts of the resurrection have Him meeting the disciples in Jerusalem. That's where you see it in the Gospel of John. That's where you see it in the Gospel of Luke.

What Mark says, however, by holding on to that Galilee moment is he is inviting us to recognize that with the resurrection of Jesus, eternity begins. Eternity begins. That means that you and I will experience Jesus through the power of his resurrection everywhere and in anyone. This is why the women were so floored by it because they had purchased some spices to anoint the body, but the body had gone missing. And they were anxious because there's no way they could anoint time and space, but that is exactly where you would meet Jesus. So Mark in inviting us to see this empty tomb is inviting us to meet Jesus anywhere, and that is terrifying.

And finally, there is in this incredible painting, an example of an artist who stayed faithful to her purpose, to her vocation. I love that picture of Jay DeFeo painting because she worked on it for seven years and she died before she had a great deal of notoriety. She never knew the effect she had on art and art history. This piece is considered an American masterpiece. And yet she stayed true to her purpose. She stayed true to her calling. She stayed true to the vocation she had as an artist to bear witness.

And you and I find these women in Mark. These women who have gone in where the men are afraid to go, they've gone in armed not with any knives or clubs, but with spices.

They've gone in because they know and they are called to be disciples of Jesus. And they were going to anoint the body and they have come to be his first witnesses of resurrection. It said in the text, of course, that the woman got the message, go tell Peter that He's been raised and they said nothing. Well, the fact that the text is here means that eventually they found their courage and said something.

The same thing happens for us as witnesses to the resurrection. You and I have the opportunity to step in and to find our purpose and to bear witness to the things that God is doing in our lives. You and I have the opportunity to claim our calling as Christians and to declare that Christ has risen and to find them everywhere.

That is the message of Easter, and that is what we are called to do. And thank God for artists who have gone before us, showing us the beautiful way we can bear witness to who we are called to be and what we are called to testify to with courage. And thanks be to God for disciples who claimed the calling to be faithful to Jesus and to proclaim that resurrection.

May you find that courage today. May you claim that resurrection. May you find in God a God who is everywhere in Christ. And may you know that Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Hallelujah.