

The Temporary Tomb

I know that in the wake of this pandemic, last Sunday's Gospel about the raising of Lazarus struck me in an entirely different way. It's amazing how that works -- almost like there some sort of spirit, a holy spirit, that drives such inspiration. Like most of us, I can pretty much summarize the story from memory: Jesus's close friend leaves him; he is wrapped up and placed in a tomb; Jesus comes and cries; Jesus orders the tomb opened; the people present are like "Dude, this isn't going to smell great"; and, finally, out comes Lazarus alive as ever. While the story certainly does foreshadow Jesus's own triumph over death, this story is also deeply about human relationship. Jesus, being fully incarnate, was a social being. I know that I never took time to think about that. In my mind, the guy had a mission and needed some peeps to help carry it out. In trying to understand the relationship between Jesus and his (our) Father, I lost sight of the immense amount of love he must have felt for his chosen humans -- his family -- whom he called friends. While thinking about the truly human dimension of the story, my focus seemed to constantly shift to the tomb itself. It is a place of complete darkness; a place of eternal isolation. Jesus knew that death wasn't going to be the final word. This led me to consider if Jesus's tears were actually due to the thought that one of his closest friends found himself in a place of complete separation -- utter isolation -- even if it was only to be for a short period of time.

A closed off tomb. Isolation. An inability to feel able to reach the fullness of relationship with our loved ones. Anyone else feeling like they can relate? I know that I can, even though I am the epitome of a homebody who prefers (far more than) a 6ft radius around me. Yet, I feel an immense amount of loss -- almost like the routine of my life, which includes so many wonderful people (many of whom I realize that I take for granted), have been slid behind the stone of a tomb. I turned 40 on March 22 and after baking my own cake I was stuck playing cards with the spouse. It felt a bit pathetic but I don't know, maybe that's what 40-somethings do anyways and I am just starting immediately.

With the quite sudden impact of the pandemic, I feel like I have found myself in a tomb separated from my students. For those who don't know, I teach AP Biology to sophomores in White Bear Lake. There is a unique joy in teaching sophomores; there is such a profound period of growth during this year that it can be hard to compare their March selves from their September selves. Instead of hand-holding and the constant nagging about deadlines, there is humor, sarcasm, and a genuine happiness to be together in a learning environment. I had just commented at a staff meeting the first week of March that "we have hit the fun point." Now, I'm faced with the reality that I may not get to walk this final part of their sophomore journey with them -- or not in the way that I had imagined.

But, we are an Easter people and we know very well that tombs never remain shut. Isolation is never permanent for followers of The Way. With God's help, the boulder standing between us and our necessary human relationships will be rolled aside. Until that time of joy, I am reflecting on those things for which I am grateful. I am thankful for YOU -- a faith community that is wholly committed to the dignity of each human being. I am thankful for being part of a parish staff that is so diverse in the gifts that are brought to the table. I am very thankful for being a resident of Minnesota and an employee of a school district that is seen as a gold star by other school districts around the country in its response to this crisis. I am thankful for an approaching spring. Most of all, I am thankful that I will have a routine to go back to. This is something that I don't know if I would have ever recognized without having been removed from it completely.

So, in the end, this will become a story -- like that of Lazarus -- about *rising* above. As a baker, *rising* reminds me of yeast. So, in this spirit, I share with you a swedish cardamom braid recipe that I love to bake. I have won many State Fair ribbons with this one and a Gold Medal Flour baking award. May it bring you a little bit of joy in the days ahead!

Swede Hollow Cardamom Braid

1 1/3 cups warm water
2 packages instant yeast
1 1/2 teaspoons cardamom (fresh, if possible)
1/3 cup dry milk
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup + 2 Tablespoons honey
1/2 cup butter, very soft
1 teaspoon salt
2 eggs, beaten
2 cups bread flour
3 to 3 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1 egg
Sliced almonds

1. Combine yeast and warm water in a mixing bowl. Add cardamom, dry milk, sugar, honey, butter, salt, eggs, and bread flour. Beat on medium for five minutes.
2. Switch to dough hook and add three cups of the all purpose flour. Allow to mix for 10 minutes. Add remaining 1/2 cup of flour if needed. Pour out onto the counter and knead by hand a few times until very smooth. Place in a greased bowl and allow to rise for at least one hour or until the dough has doubled in size.
3. Punch down, divide into three equal portions (each portion will make a braid). Take each portion and divide into three smaller components. Roll into long ropes and then braid. (I form mine into circular braids) Cover and allow to rise until doubled in size.
4. Create a wash with the egg and brush on braids. Decorate with almonds. Bake at 375F for 30 minutes or until a light golden brown. When you tap it, it should sound hollow.
5. Let cool and slice!