

Woman, Why Are You Weeping?

Easter Sunday 2018

Church of the Advent

Good morning and welcome to Church of the Advent this fine Easter morning, where we say with heart Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! No matter how many Easters have come and gone in life, coming together to share in the joy of the Resurrection never gets old. Even after a long Holy Week of remembrance of God's gift of sacrifice on the cross, our energy is renewed in hope, and there are pastels at the end of the tunnel. I don't know about you, but my Easter memories involve chocolate in many shapes for breakfast, a wasteland of tiny foil wrappings, and days of chasing stray pieces of fake unnaturally colored grass that scattered everywhere. From my own childhood to my childrens,' there has been a parade of plush rabbits that could have rivaled the population of *Watership Down*—one of which became the best friend of both children in turn. And though some old Easter traditions—like little girl's hats with those tight elastic bands that went around the chin to hold them on, or thrilling a city kid with one single live chick, that invariably died within days—have appropriately faded away with time, I am glad that there are still jelly beans in the world.

Of course the best and most important tradition is gathering to hear the Good News of the Resurrection on Easter morning in church. This morning we hear the Easter story from the Gospel of John. It is a great story: full of surprise, the mixed emotions of anxiety, sorrow and joy, mistaken identity, and a shocking unexpected and mystical experience of the risen Lord. The story is told through the eyes of (oddly) a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was likely considered a peripheral member of the community of disciples of Jesus. I imagine the women *were* appreciated for their contributions to the group—cooking for and cleaning up after the men most likely. Yet, because of the attention and forgiveness and acceptance of Jesus, the women were probably stronger and more important in the Kingdom of God than the men gave them credit for. All four gospels placed Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion, which speaks of her devotion to Jesus, and of her strength of character, in spite of being cast in an unjustifiably questionable light in much of church history since.

I would imagine Mary had not slept much after Jesus died, waiting through the Sabbath until sundown, and then waiting for it to get quiet enough to creep out to the graveyard in the dark by herself—an uncommon thing for a woman to do then, and now. She must have been watching and following those men who had taken Jesus’ body down from the cross, prepared it, and buried it in this particular place. *Who knows* what she expected—perhaps just some private time and space to grieve the loss of someone she loved after a terrible couple of days since Jesus had been arrested and taken away. Mary could not have been expecting to *see* the body of Jesus—which she knew had already been lathered with oils and spices and wrapped up in linen by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus before being encased behind that heavy stone. More likely she just wanted to be as near to her Lord as she could imagine, just as we might visit a grave of someone we miss, trying to close that distance held by death. Mary might have carried some unfinished business—needing to say some words that had not been said before Jesus was snatched away from them out of the garden where he had been praying. Perhaps she just needed to say a private goodbye. Perhaps she was so devastated that she did not know what she wanted.

And then the shock to find the tomb disturbed—the stone moved, *and no body!* She ran back to get the men, Peter and the Beloved John to tell them—for what could she do about it, a lone woman in the night? We are not told how far they had to run, but the race to the scene by these two men throws a little comic irony into the story—the Beloved disciple had been there with Jesus at the foot of the cross, while Peter had slinked back into the crowd after three times denying, out loud, that he even knew Jesus. There has been much theological speculation as to why the author of this story described them racing with each other, and why the Beloved disciple overtook Peter. Had he earned the “first look” by his loyalty, or was he to have a more important role in the foundation of the Early Church than Peter? I venture to say he was in better shape than Peter, was maybe a little younger, or maybe he had better sandals.

When the two arrived at the tomb and found that Mary was telling the truth, they went inside to find the body’s coverings neatly folded and placed on the slab. What went through their minds—that the body had been taken away by the orders of someone in authority—adding insult to injury? If so, why strip it down? Who would want to take the risk of being made unclean by carrying a dead body without some kind of wrappings on it? And on the Sabbath?

What was going on? They did not stick around to question anyone or to investigate. They did not go to those authorities, demanding an explanation. We are told that the one who was beloved then “believed” but the story does not tell us *what* he believed. They said nothing, and went home, and Mary did *not* follow them. We don’t *know* what the men thought, because the rest of this story is not about *them*.

It is only when they leave Mary alone weeping at the empty tomb that the angels appear, and ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She has a ready answer, seeming not to question why two figures in white are *sitting*—calmly—on either end of the slab where the body should have been. Her single concern is to find the body of her Lord, and then he makes his unrecognized presence known. “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Finding Jesus walking around in his tomb looking like a gardener would certainly have been the farthest thing from Mary’s imagination possible, so she takes him for what he appears to be, the caretaker of the property, who surely would have noticed some grave robbers on his watch. Mary persists in her desperation to find Jesus, boldly claiming that *she herself* will go after that body, claim it and take care of it, if only he will tell her where to go to find it. She is tearful, and she is brave, and she is determined. And then she hears the voice that reaches into the deepest part of her, calling her name, “Mary.” At that moment she knows she *has* found Jesus, despite his appearance as a gardener, and despite her certainty that he had already died, brutally and cruelly and recently, right before her eyes. She hears his voice and turns to her Teacher, her Shepherd, her risen Lord.

We might expect at this point a climactic embrace—Mary and Jesus hugging and crying and smiling and talking over each other and asking questions and looking for clarification and asking how and why and when and what it all meant and what would happen next. Instead Jesus tells her, “Do not hold on to me.” Just when she finds him, she has to let him go. It would take a few more encounters with Jesus for the disciples to do the same, and then to go, like Mary, and tell others what they had seen.

I suspect that all of our wider cultural Easter traditions awash in Spring pastels and stuffed baby animals and once-a-year special treats have evolved over time out of our need to

clothe the Resurrection of Jesus in something recognizably joyful, because an empty tomb is not only a symbol of death, but, well, *empty*. When we look for Jesus *there*, sometimes all we find is pile of folded up linen, and maybe the gardener, who at first glance seems of no account. And then to wrestle with the idea that Jesus might be right in front of us and we would not recognize him, or hear his voice, what is that all about, anyway? We might just find ourselves going back home, scratching our heads, and opening up another chocolate egg.

The message of the gospel this morning is this: don't give up on the mystery of it all, because what is at stake is salvation. By all means, enjoy the rites of Spring that we celebrate with Easter, but do not discount what joy you might discover in the lonely dark. Be brave and determined in seeking your Lord. *Run* if you have to. Pay attention to those unassuming angels you come across, and don't overlook the gardener. Listen for the voice calling you by name. And sing the words from Isaiah:

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,
so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

May all the Blessings of this Easter Day be with you and those you love. The Lord is Risen indeed! Amen.