

Sunday, April 21, 2019
Easter Day
John 20.1-18
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When I was in Israel in January, I noticed that several churches marking holy sites in the life of Jesus had signs by the doors that read “No explanations inside the church.” This was not so much for the visitors as a reminder to tour guides leading pilgrims through these holy places. If you’ve ever been on a tour, you know that they can be filled with non-stop chatter. Many tour guides tend to be very talkative—trying to convey as much of their knowledge about places visited as possible. The sign “No explanations inside the church” is intended to remind the talkative guides that this is a place of prayer. A holy place to be experienced in the silence of the heart rather than in the cacophony of facts and figures and historical anecdotes inundating the ears and the mind.

That warning is particularly appropriate on a day like Easter. “No explanation inside the church.” The event that we celebrate this day is a mystery of faith that cannot be explained. We have faith that Christ was resurrected from the dead. How that happened, we do not know. We have faith that through his Resurrection, sin and death were defeated. How that happened, we do not know. We have faith that through Christ’s death and Resurrection, we are forgiven of our sins, that we receive salvation, and that we share in a new and eternal life with him. How that happens, we do not know. These are all matters of faith that have no rational explanation. We merely trust the words of Scripture, we trust in the love of God, and we trust in our lived experiences of God working in our lives. The meaning of our faith cannot be explained. It can only be experienced.

We see something of this in the story of Jesus’ Resurrection in today’s Gospel reading. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to see the body of her beloved teacher and friend, to mourn his death. Upon arriving at the tomb, she finds the stone removed from its entrance and the body gone. She immediately runs to Peter and John and tells them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (Jn 20.2). They, of course, hurry to the tomb to check it out. As if Mary cannot be trusted. They find everything as she had told them. Empty tomb. No Jesus. Nothing to be done here, so Peter and John return home. Men! Taking everything at face value.

But rather than be satisfied with the mystery of the missing body, Mary hangs around. Hoping against hope that somewhere in that garden, somewhere in that tomb, she will find the answer she seeks. The answer to what happened to Jesus’ body. When she looks in the tomb, she is met by two angels who ask her why she is distressed. After she tells them, she turns to find another figure there, who asks the same thing, “Woman, why are you weeping?” (Jn 20.15). Mary explains her distress to the unknown figure, who then calls her by name. Mary! She knows that voice. There is something in the way he says her name that transcends mere hearing and touches her heart. Touches the very depth of her being. She knows. She knows that this has to be Jesus.

Out of instinct, moved by something that has welled up from within her, Mary responds, “Rabbouni!” Such a tender moment of recognition. Even if it defies all logic. There is that part of her that knows that Jesus can’t be standing there in front of her. She watched him die just two days before. But yet, there is something about him, about his voice, about the feelings of love it evokes, that lets her know this is indeed Jesus. Has she also remembered that he had told her and the other disciples that he would die and then be raised to life? Perhaps. We can’t be certain. What is certain is that this is without a doubt her beloved friend and teacher, Jesus, standing right in front of her.

Jesus then explains to her what is happening and tells her to go to the disciples and tell them “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (Jn 20.17). She does as instructed and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20.18). The first declaration, the first affirmation, of the Risen Lord.

This experience at the tomb on Easter morning leaves Mary and the other disciples—and us—without any clear answers as to what happened to Jesus. And frankly, that is not the question we seek to answer this day. As much as our post-Enlightenment selves want, even need, answers, we are not going to find them in the Easter story. The best we can hope for, and precisely what is intended to be answered in light of the empty tomb, is the question, “Where is Jesus now? Where is he for us?” Or maybe more accurately, “Who are we now, who must we become, what must we do, in light of the risen Christ?”

The answers to those questions are as individual as we are. The words of Scripture will not tell us with any degree of certainty how to respond. What Scripture can provide is a roadmap to help us navigate those questions. Particularly through the post-resurrection writings, through the stories of the disciples and others who came to know the Risen Lord in their own ways, and responded in their own unique ways, we can glean something of what it means to follow the Risen Christ. Of how we are to respond. Of who we are supposed to become as his followers. Of what we are to do.

The model for how we do that is found in how Mary Magdalene herself comes to recognize the Risen Lord. Unlike Peter and John, who come looking for answers, find none, and simply go home, Mary sticks around. She stays present to the situation, even if filled with uncertainty. She stays around and lets herself be open to whatever may present itself. She lets herself be open to finding Christ in whatever way he might present himself. And then, even when she encounters someone who she does not initially recognize as her friend and teacher, she is still open. She listens. Not with her ears. Not with her mind. But with her heart. And when Jesus lovingly calls out to her, she recognizes his voice in that deep, inner place that is her soul. And she immediately knows what she has to do. She has to go out and proclaim “I have seen the Lord.”

We don’t exactly know what happens to Mary after that. What she goes on to do. Scripture does not record that. Although there are some non-canonical writings that indicate she went on to become a leader among the disciples, a leader in the early Church. That she carried on the mission begun by her Lord.

That is what this day is about. It is about being open to the voice of the Risen Christ, lovingly calling out to us and inviting us to continue with his ministry. But his voice does not just reach our ears, does not just reach our hearts, on Easter Sunday alone. Because we focus on the Resurrection on this day, Easter Sunday is sometimes mistaken for an annual commemoration of an event that happened 2,000 years ago. But in fact, the early Church treated the mystery of Christ' death and resurrection as a timeless event that was commemorated in every celebration of the Eucharistic. An event that was celebrated every Sunday. The establishment of an annual observance of Easter Day was only a latter development.

The truth is, in reality Easter isn't something we do once a year. It isn't an event we remember once a year. It is the celebration of the hope and the promise of the resurrection that is given to all of us. It is not a theological conundrum to be proven. It's something we experience, that we live, every day of our lives. The resurrection is something we seek to experience every day of our lives. For the Risen Lord is still out and about. Still waiting for us to show up. Still waiting for us to be open to hearing his voice. And the proof of the resurrection is found in the living it out in our own lives.

Most importantly, resurrection is about relationship. About the healing and restoration of relationships that may be damaged or even broken. Relationships between God and humanity. Relationships between people. Relationships between humanity and the rest of creation. As Athenagoras, an Orthodox theologian and Patriarch of Constantinople once noted, "The Resurrection is not the resuscitation of a body; it is the beginning of the transfiguration of the world."

We all are in search of something bigger than ourselves. Of a reason for hope, particularly in the midst of a broken and hurting world. Of something that will transfigure the world. That hope was provided when Jesus, through his death and Resurrection, broke the bonds of sin and death, promising new and eternal life for us all. The hope and promise that we celebrate on Easter Sunday. Our job on this day, is not to try to figure out what happened at Jesus' Resurrection. Our job is to be open to experiencing the hope and the promise of the resurrection in our own lives. To hear Jesus calling out to us in a deep and loving way, inviting us into the sacred mystery. To live into the fullness of what that that sacred mystery has to offer. And to proclaim with Mary, "I have seen the Lord."

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!