

Sunday, April 12, 2020

Easter Day (Year A)

John 20.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1130924250587265/>

(Sermon begins at about 17:30)

“The Promise of the Empty Tomb”

Ours is an incarnational faith. In other words, it is the faith of “stuff.” Not a faith in stuff, but a faith of stuff. A faith that relies on stuff, on the physical, the tangible, as symbols to help us understand just what our faith means, what we believe. God’s grace is expressed through the physical. Water poured on our heads at baptism as a sign of cleansing and the forgiveness of our sins; a symbolic going into the waters of baptism whereby we die to self and are born to new life in Christ. Bread and wine at Eucharist as symbols of the inward grace of Christ’s Body and Blood given for us for the forgiveness of our sins, to strengthen our relationship with Christ and one another, and to be a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that we will all one day share. The Peace, where we greet each other with a shake of the hand or a hug as a gesture of our reconciliation with one another so that we may also be reconciled with God as we approach his table. That’s just normal Sunday stuff for us.

Then there are the physical signs at special services we only do once a year. Ashes placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday as a sign of our sinfulness and our mortality. The waving of palms on Palm Sunday as a sign that Jesus is our King. The washing of feet on Maundy Thursday as a reminder of Jesus’ commandment to love one another. Venerating the cross on Good Friday as a recognition of the sacrifice Christ made for us. Lighting of the new fire at the Great Vigil of Easter as a symbol of Christ as the light of the world dispelling the darkness of sin and death. The smell of incense as a symbol of our prayers and praises wafting up to God.

These are just the most obvious. There are many more physical things, physical acts, that we use to express our faith. All these signs and symbols having a far greater significance to what our faith is about than would appear on the surface.

But wait, there’s more. When it comes to the incarnational, we must remember the big one: The Incarnation, with a capital “I.” Jesus himself. The fact that God loves us so much that he came in the flesh, in the form of his Son Jesus. To live among us. To experience life as we do. To be with us face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. Even to die as we do. No, strike that. Die, yes. As we do, no. For his death, which we just commemorated on Good Friday, was no ordinary death. Jesus died in a most horrific way, being nailed to a cross. Even that is incarnational. Physical. Visceral. The rough wood of the cross against bare flesh. The cold metal of the nails pounded into hands and feet. You can’t get any more real than that. You can’t get any more physical.

As physical beings ourselves, we cannot help but find meaning in the physical. In the tangible. In what we can see and touch. It is the physical that gives us comfort, because it is real. It is true. Perhaps that is why our faith abounds with physical signs and symbols. These things somehow

make our faith real. Of course, our faith is more than just the bread and wine we see on the altar. Our faith is more than the cross in its stand in the sanctuary. Our faith is more than the water that is poured over a person's head at baptism. All these signs and symbols point to a greater truth that we cannot see with physical eyes. To a greater truth that we can only see with the eyes of faith, with the eyes of our soul.

In our Gospel reading for today, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. We're not sure why. Was she planning on performing some burial ritual? Did she just want one last look at her now-dead friend and teacher? Whatever it was, she was in search of the physical. She was in search of—she needed to see—Jesus' body in that tomb. She is in deep mourning. Not just mourning the death of a dear friend. This was the death of the one who promised hope. This was the death of the one who was the physical embodiment of hope. But when she gets there, the stone had been removed and the tomb was empty. No Jesus. Mary is distraught. How can she say her good-byes if there is no physical body? Without Jesus' body, is there even any proof that the events of the last few days had happened? Without physical proof, would anyone ever believe the message that Jesus proclaimed? That he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the very embodiment of hope for humanity.

After Peter and John verify that Jesus' body is gone and essentially give up and go home, Mary lingers near the tomb, uncertain what she should do. She is approached by a man she assumes to be the gardener. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." When he calls her by name, "Mary," she sees with new eyes. She sees with eyes of faith. She recognizes him in a way she had not before. "Rabbouni!" Her immediate reaction is a physical one. She wants nothing more than to throw her arms around him, to hold him. But what does Jesus say? "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

There is much speculation about why Jesus would not let Mary touch him. Was it because he no longer had a truly physical body, but rather a spiritual one? That gets into a whole other theological debate that we don't need to go into right now. The reality is we just can't know for sure. But what we do know is that there is something more profound, something beyond the physical at work here. "Do not hold on to me." As much as Mary wants hold on to Jesus, to keep him with her, that was not possible. Jesus still had work to do. He says that he needs to ascend "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." In other words, Jesus' ascent and return to the Father would be what enables us to share fully in his relationship with God. To complete his mission. To bring to completion the whole purpose for the Incarnation: to secure the relationship between God and his people in a deeper way that transcends flesh and blood relationship. That transcends our physical lives. That transcends even death.

Mary had a hard lesson to learn that first Easter morning. She went in search of the physical body of Jesus, out of love for him. Because of the relationship she had with him in life. His body was proof of that relationship. His body was proof of the hope that he promised. But Jesus helped her to realize that her relationship with him transcends the physical. That her relationship with him in his physical form was merely a symbol, a shadow, of a far deeper relationship. Of a far deeper truth. Of a far deeper love. One that is far more permanent than

what these physical bodies of ours afford. A permanent relationship with Christ and with God that is new and eternal.

I suppose on this Easter Sunday that is stranger than any of us have ever experienced, we might feel a bit like Mary Magdalene. Lost. Alone. Isolated. Bereft of hope. She goes to the tomb looking for Jesus, but he is not there. As a result, she gets stuck in the last experience she had of him. The image of him dying on the cross on Good Friday. The image of his body being taken down and laid in the tomb. She is stuck in a dark time, left uncertain as to what happened to Jesus' body. Uncertain as to what would happen to her. Uncertain as to what the future holds. For us at this time in our history, it is also easy to get stuck in the darkness of Good Friday. Particularly as we are still living in a Good Friday situation, filled with death and despair. After all, where is the joy, where is resurrection, where is new life, in our lives right now?

We are feeling alone, isolated, maybe even bereft of hope. Like Mary, we are denied physical reminders of Christ's presence in our lives. How can we celebrate Easter without all the physical things that make Easter, Easter? The church filled with people. The Paschal Candle burning bright. The baptismal font filled with water. The bread and the wine made into the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. The brass instruments accompanying us in "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." The white and gold festal vestments. The lilies. All the physical signs that this is a truly special day like no other. Signs of celebration of a deeper truth than any of these signs and symbols can possibly convey. How can we celebrate Easter without all these things?

Ask Mary Magdalene. She didn't have any of those things on that first Easter. She had precisely what we have. Zip. She didn't even have the body of Jesus. And we don't have the Body of Christ gathered together in person. All she found on that first Easter was an empty tomb. And right now, in these extraordinary times, that's all we have: an empty church that mirrors a tomb.

But Mary found what she was looking for. Not in the way she expected, but she found Jesus, nonetheless. Not the Jesus she was hoping to find, but something even better. In that garden, outside the empty tomb, she met the Risen Lord. The One who promised her that he was going to his Father and her Father, to his God and her God. To forever seal the relationship between God and his people. To provide them with the hope and the promise of forgiveness of their sins, and new and eternal life.

The message Jesus had for Mary is the same message he has for us. Easter is not a time to look backward at the darkness of what went before. It is not a time to try to seek the body of Jesus lying in a tomb. Easter is a time to look into the empty tomb and see it for what it is. The proof that Christ has come through his own Good Friday experience and defeated sin and death. And in the process, he provides assurance that no matter what Good Friday experiences we may have in our own lives, there is hope. There is the promise of new life. A new life in and through him.

On this day, as we stand outside the empty tomb, as we sit in our homes away from our empty church, the Risen Lord comes to us. Calling each of us by name. Assuring us that the dark times we live in are not the end of the story. That there is something more. That there is something

better on the horizon. That there is new life. Not just on the other side of this pandemic, but new and eternal life made possible through his death and resurrection. New and eternal life that is ours, even now. This is his promise to us.

Let this be our comfort. Let this be our rallying cry this Easter Day and beyond, that even though things may still seem dark and we do not have the comfort of all the physical stuff that symbolize our faith: the church may be empty, but so is the tomb.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!