

Sunday, April 4, 2021

Easter Sunday (Year B)

John 20.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/237146608146996>

(Sermon begins at about 22:10)

“A New Reality”

We generally think of Easter as the end of Lent, the end of Holy Week. But the reality is, Easter is not the end of anything. If anything, it is the beginning of something completely new and unknown. We see this starkly represented by the principal characters in today’s resurrection narrative. But I’m not talking about Jesus. I’m talking about Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the disciple Jesus loved—that would be John. The principal characters who represent us. The characters who each react in very different ways, representing the range of ways in which we can respond to the mystery that is the Resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is the first disciple to find the tomb empty and reports back to the others. As the de factor leader of the disciples, Simon Peter is the first to actually go into the tomb to inspect the situation. Presumably to ascertain if Jesus’ body is indeed gone and try to figure out what happened. We are told surprisingly little about his response. We are merely told that “He saw the linens lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself” (Jn 20.6b-7). Yep, the body is gone. While Peter does not react, we can safely assume that he was satisfied with that he saw. The fact that the burial linens were still there, even though the body wasn’t, would indicate that Jesus’ body had not been taken, as Mary first assumed. Someone taking a dead body would not likely unwrap it first. And even if they did, it is certainly unlikely that they would go to all the trouble of neatly folding up the linens. Jesus did tell the disciples three times that he would be raised from the dead. Seeing the burial linens seemed to have been enough to satisfy Peter. No use belaboring the point. John seems to have a similar response. Although we are told that “he saw and believed” (Jn 20.8). So, for Peter and John, the response seems to be “He’s risen. Now that that’s done, let’s go home.” With nothing else to go on, what more could they do?

Well, instead of taking things at face value, maybe Peter and John could have learned a thing or two from Mary. About not being so quick to “call it,” but to stick around and see if something more might be in the offing. Mary, unlike Peter and John, sticks around. Perhaps because she is not convinced that Jesus really has been raised. After all, when she looks in the tomb, now occupied with two angels, she says “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (Jn 20.13b). Sounds like she is not as convinced as were Peter and John. Grief will do that to you. You aren’t always able to think straight. And besides, even though Jesus said he would be “lifted up,” no one really knew what that looked like. Had he been “lifted up” or had something else happened? It appears that Mary stayed around to find out. And certainly, on another level, this being where Jesus had been buried, it was a place she could feel close to, connected with, Jesus. Even if Jesus was nowhere to be found.

That is, until Jesus found Mary. “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (Jn 20.15). Coincidentally, here at the end of his life, his words echo the first words John’s Gospel records Jesus speaking at the start of his public ministry: when a couple of John the Baptist’s disciples started following Jesus and he asked them, “What are looking for?” (Jn 1.38). Logical enough questions in both situations. A coincidence? Not likely. There are no coincidences in John’s careful crafting of the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, from the beginning of his public ministry to his resurrection. John is signaling that what is happening here is a new beginning. And Mary was going to play a critical role in that new beginning.

When Jesus calls Mary by name, her eyes are opened. Not her physical eyes, for she obviously saw the man standing before her. No, the eyes of her heart were opened. She is able to recognize just who this is. She exclaims, “Rabbouni!” A personal form of address for “Rabbi,” but even more so, a term of endearment. While the Gospel account doesn’t say so, it is implied that Mary instinctively goes to throw her arms around Jesus. It would be the natural thing to do, as a way of greeting her dear friend whom she never really got a chance to say good-bye to. A natural thing to do out of relief that his body had not been taken away after all. But before she can do so, Jesus cautions her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father” (Jn 20.17a).

One of the things that puzzles people about the exchange between Jesus and Mary is this response by Jesus: “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” There is much speculation about why Jesus said this. Was it because in his resurrected state, Jesus did not have a truly corporeal body? That he was more spirit than physical? Although later in John’s Gospel, Jesus invites Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side” (Jn 20.27). He could not have made his point if he did not have a physical body for Thomas to actually touch. And sometime later, Jesus has breakfast with the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Kind of hard to eat if you don’t have an actual body. Perhaps it has nothing to do with him or his body at all. Perhaps Jesus’ comment is more about what Mary—and by extension, all who believe in the resurrected Jesus, including us—are to make of the events of the resurrection. What is Mary, what are we, to do with the resurrected Jesus? If anything, it is likely that Jesus did not mean “hold on to me” as in physically embracing him, but more metaphorically. That she is not to hold on to the memory of who he was, who she knew him to be in life. Because now, in resurrected form, he transcends all that. He is far more than Mary can imagine. Something that will be revealed in due course. And along with that expanded understanding of who Jesus is, that she is to be open to the possibilities that lie before her.

But wait, there’s more. Mary has a critical role to play in the unfolding of the drama. She has a critical part to play in this figuring out and living into what we do with the resurrected Jesus. Before Mary can ask any questions—which she undoubtedly had in spades—Jesus continues: “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20.17b). He is commissioning her to be his messenger to the disciples. He is commissioning her to be the first person to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. Making her, in that moment, the single most important person in all the world. Well, after Jesus, of course. She has the awesome responsibility of conveying the most startling, the most awesome, news of all time.

The magnitude of that news is contained in the words, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” These words are literally life changing. In his third and final prediction of his death and resurrection, Jesus told his disciples “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12.32). In this statement, he highlights the purpose for his death and resurrection. That this will usher in the universal salvation made available for all people. A complete change in the understanding of what salvation means and who salvation is for.

This is achieved by changing the nature of the relationship between the people and God. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becomes the bridge, making possible deeper and more intimate relationship with God. My Father and your Father. My God and your God. Making relationship with God more accessible than it had ever been before. More accessible because now, through Jesus’ death and resurrection, sin and death themselves have been defeated. The very things that resulted in separation between God and humanity have been eliminated. Not just eliminated, but replaced with eternal life. Replaced with the possibility of a new and eternal relationship. And what we need to remember is this new relationship does not start when we die. It started the moment Jesus stepped out of that tomb. It was spoken into being the moment Jesus spoke to Mary, calling her by name. It was put into motion when Jesus commissioned Mary to go tell the disciples the good news of the resurrection. It started for each and every one of us the moment we made the decision to become followers of Jesus Christ.

And the possibilities, the ramifications, of this changed relationship with God, of the new and eternal life that have been given to us, does not stop with what happened on that first Easter morning. What Christ achieved through his death and resurrection are so monumental, we are still figuring out what it means 2,000 years later. So amazing, so awesome, are the possibilities, that every moment brings new opportunities for exploring and living into the more intimate relationship with God that Jesus has opened before us. Even in a time of pandemic, when we had to shut our doors to in-person worship to protect one another. But even that did not shut out the love of God or our ongoing relationship with him. If anything, it provided opportunities for exploring new and creative ways of living out our relationship with God and with God’s beloved children. It provided opportunities to further expand our reach, even as we were sheltered in place.

Last Easter may not have seemed much like Easter. Even though Jesus had stepped out of the tomb, it may have felt that we were still in the tomb. But a year later, there is a very different feel. Our circumstances are very different. We are preparing to follow Jesus’ lead, to step out and begin a whole new life of service to him. This is the meaning of resurrection.

Easter is not the end of anything. Easter is the beginning of everything. Easter is the beginning of a whole new world of possibilities. Easter is the beginning of a new reality that has sprung into being on this day. That became reality with the revelation of the empty tomb. A new reality, with new possibilities, opened to Mary, opened to the disciples, opened to us. Like Mary Magdalene, let us to stick around and embrace the new possibilities that are open to us and live into the fullness of what this new resurrected reality holds for us.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!