

Sunday, April 17, 2022

Easter Day (Year C)

Acts 10.34-43; John 20.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1618666931821979>

(Sermon begins at about 22:15)

“The New Normal”

Today has been a long time coming! The last time we celebrated Easter Sunday in-person was in 2019. I’m sure we all recall the beginning of the pandemic and the mandatory stay-at-home order that went into effect on March 20th of 2020. At that time, when the Bishop ordered the cancelling of all in-person worship, he was hopeful that this would all be behind us and we would be back to in-person worship within three or four weeks. Just in time for Easter 2020. And all us clergy were talking about what a glorious Easter that would be, as we celebrated Christ’s resurrection and the end of the pandemic. Right. Not only was church not reopened by Easter, we were not even allowed to live stream from within the church at that time. Instead, our Easter service was live streamed from my dining room. I have to tell you, that was a pretty depressing Easter. At the end of the service, I closed my laptop and started crying. Sure, we had celebrated the Lord’s resurrection. We had brought back the “Alleluias.” We had even sung two quintessential Easter hymns: “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” and “The Strife is O’er.” And yet, it did not feel like Easter. I did not feel as if Christ had risen. At the least, the Body of Christ that is St. Gregory’s had not risen. And the strife was not o’er. As it turned out, it was just beginning.

A year later, Easter 2021, things were opening up a little more, but the church was still closed to in-person worship. Again, we had no choice but to live stream our Easter service for the second year in a row. This time, from within the church, with a limited crew comprised of me, a reader, our organist, a quartet of the choir, and our live stream producer. By then, things felt a little more like Easter, although still a bit of a let-down. But by then, it appeared that we would soon be returning to in-person worship. Which we were able to do six week later.

Fast forward to today. Easter 2022. And here we are, back to in-person worship. Gathered together, celebrating the joys of resurrection—both Christ’s and ours as a worshipping community. The celebration we thought we were going to be able to have two years ago. Sure, we are still in the midst of a global pandemic. There are areas in the world where cases are increasing. There is renewed concern by our County public health officials about a slight rise in cases of the latest variant and what that might mean in the near term. But overall, we are moving in the right direction. Overall, rate of new cases and deaths have decreased. Most institutions and those businesses that have survived are pretty much back to normal operations—albeit with some necessary modifications. And life is returning to normal. At least, as normal as its going be moving forward. Particularly as we continue with new ways of doing things and contend with the ongoing economic impacts of disrupted supply chains and shifts in labor practices. Our world was turned upside down. It is still upside down in many ways. But we have and will continue to adjust. Some refer to this as a “new normal.” Personally, I don’t think we’re there yet. I think it will be quite a while before we find, before we live into, a new normal.

Which is really not so different from what the disciples must have felt on that first Easter morning and in the days that followed. When their world had been turned upside down. Not by a global pandemic, but by the death of their friend and teacher, their Messiah. An event that, as we hear elsewhere in scripture, drove them into their own form of lockdown. Not a government-mandate lockdown, but hiding away out of fear that the Temple or Roman authorities might come after them next. And following the initial shock, there was a time of adjustment. As the disciples sought to find their new normal, as summarized in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. How for a period after his resurrection, the Risen Lord came to those “who were chosen by God as witnesses . . . [and] He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10.41-42). But then again, that really is the story arc for the entire Easter season, and maybe even for the whole of our history as a church. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, just yet.

Our Gospel reading for today is one of the accounts of one of Jesus’ followers going to the tomb on the third day after Jesus’ death and finding the tomb empty. In the account from the Gospel according to John, which we heard this morning, that person is Mary Magdalene, who goes to the tomb alone. This is contrary to other Gospel accounts, each of which have a group of women coming to the tomb on Easter morning to properly prepare Jesus’ body for burial. According to John’s Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had already performed the customary burial rituals on Good Friday. So, Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb early on Easter morning is for a different purpose. One that is more personal. She is coming out of grief. She is coming to say the goodbyes that she did not have a chance to make before Jesus was arrested and taken away from her and their friends.

As we heard, Mary finds the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb had been removed. She has no one with whom she can share this moment of shock, of confusion as she approaches the empty tomb. No one to help her process what is going on. She immediately goes to notify Peter and John, two of the chief apostles. They come and investigate and find that Jesus’ body is indeed gone. We aren’t really sure what they made of the situation. We are told that John—who is referred to as the “other disciple”—“saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. And then they returned to their homes” (Jn 20.8-10). So, did they understand or not? It’s a bit unclear. More than likely, they were still confused. Still trying to make sense out of it. So they go off, presumably to try to sort it out for themselves.

But Mary stays at the tomb. This is where she needs to be as she tries to make sense of the confusing turn of events. Not just of Jesus’ death, but now the fact that his body has gone missing. And we are given a glimpse into the unfolding of her understanding. To the first moments when her new normal begins to form.

As she stands in that garden, feeling lost and confused, a kindly stranger asks, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (Jn 20.15). Assuming he is the gardener, she explains her predicament. To which he responds by tenderly calling her by name. “Mary.” That one word—her name, that she had heard Jesus speak so many times before—is all it takes for

her to believe and understand. Her tears of grief and sorrow turn to tears of joy as she recognizes the one in front of her. “Rabbouni.” And she goes to embrace him. Then Jesus says, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not ascended to the Father” (Jn 20.17a). Some note that in these words, he is telling Mary not to embrace him. But that is not what he’s saying at all. Rather, she cannot hold on to the way he had been. To the way she had known him. That the Jesus, the one she had spent the last several years with, is gone. He can’t go back to who he was. He has moved on. He has been resurrected. He has been changed. As a result, his relationship with her has changed.

If anything, Mary’s relationship with Jesus takes on a greater significance now that he is dead and resurrected. Jesus’ work is not yet complete. He still has to ascend to heaven. But in the meantime, there is still work to be done. Now that he has been resurrected, he needs to make sure that the disciples understand what happened. To understand what this means for them and for their ongoing work of proclaiming the Gospel. And Jesus knows she is just the one to help them understand. “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). Jesus has faith in her. She is the first witness to the Risen Christ. She is to be the apostle to the apostles. She is to be the one who helps the others understand that they are not to cower in fear and lament the loss of their teacher. She is to be the one who helps them understand that there will be a new normal.

When we talk about a new normal in our own times, that term often carries some baggage. There is an implied value judgement. More often than not, “new normal” carries the implication that, compared to what we used to know, this new normal is not quite as good as what we had known previously. That in finding a new normal, we are settling for something lesser, maybe even incomplete. A pale comparison to what we had known, the way things had always been.

The new normal that Mary Magdalene and the other disciples experienced at Easter and in the time that followed was far from “not quite as good.” It was far from lesser or incomplete. Sure, it was different. And there was a loss. A terrible loss. Of their dear friend and teacher. But what was gained through that apparent loss was priceless. Far beyond anything they could have dreamed off. For that apparent loss resulted in gains that no human could ever have obtained otherwise. That through his death and resurrection, Christ defeated the two greatest enemies to humanity, the two greatest barriers between God and humanity: sin and death. That was the real loss during those three days between Good Friday and Easter. Losses no one would lament. For in the defeat of sin, Christ gained for all of us the forgiveness of our sins. Wiped away. A clean slate. A slate that is now forever clean. And in the defeat of death, Christ gained for all of us the promise of eternal life. Not immortality in these bodies in this place. But rather a new and glorious life when this life is through. Eternal life characterized by reconciliation with God and one another in God’s heavenly kingdom. That is the new normal that Mary Magdalene witnessed when she encountered the Risen Lord in that garden. That was the normal he was inviting her into when he tenderly called her name.

That is the new normal that has been the foundation of all that has been ever since. Sure, there have been lots of changes to what we have considered normal over the last 2,000 years. Some we would consider good. Some we would consider not-so-good. But most we would probably

just consider as being what they are. We are going through changes in our society and in our individual lives even now. And we can be assured that we will go through more changes throughout our lives and in our development as a society. But one thing remains certain and unchanging. That is the “new normal” of the life of redemption and salvation, forgiveness and eternal life, that Christ ushered in as he burst from his tomb, defeating the bonds of sin and death. The new normal that he invites all of us into, calling each of us by name.