

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday

John 20.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/907454377205570>

(Sermon begins at about 23:25)

“Whom Are You Looking For?”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Imagine what that first Easter Day would have been like. The darkness, the emptiness, the loneliness that Jesus’ disciples experienced following his horrific death by crucifixion on Good Friday. Their world would have been turned upside down. Their lives would have been in shambles. Their faith would have been shattered. Understandably, they would have been filled with such a mixture of emotions. Grief and sorrow at the profound loss they had experienced. Anger at the betrayal by one of their own. Outrage at the injustice. Confusion as to why it had even happened in the first place. These and so many more. How could they ever pick up the pieces and move on? Despite this, or maybe because of it, Mary Magdalene feels compelled to go to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Maybe she will find some answers, some clarity.

As we heard, Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark. Probably out of fear. The emotion that was undoubtedly among the strongest for the disciples at that time. After all, Jesus had been arrested on charges of blasphemy and sedition, tried, convicted, and executed. It would be reasonable to assume that those associated with Jesus could be next in the crosshairs. So, she was likely fearful of what might happen to her and her friends. Despite the fear, Mary experiences another emotion. One that is far stronger, overcoming the fear, so that she is not deterred in going to the tomb. She goes out of deep love for her beloved friend and teacher, wishing to pay the respects she was unable to when Jesus’ lifeless body was removed from the cross and hastily prepared for burial and placed in the tomb before the beginning of the Sabbath. Love for the one who loved her unconditionally. Love for the one she had willingly given up her life to follow. So, out of pure love, in response to the tug of her heart-strings, she summons the courage to venture out. Unlike the other disciples—the male disciples—who were also fearful. But chose instead to remain in hiding.

Upon arriving at the tomb, finding the stone removed from the entrance, she would have been confused at why this would be. Confusion giving way to fear and even anger that someone had presumably taken Jesus’ body. The only thing to do being to go to Peter, the now de facto head of their group, to let him know. Maybe he would have an idea of what to do. Although, after he and John come and verify Mary’s report, confirm her fears, they simply leave. Almost as if saying, “oh well, nothing we can do about it.” Leaving as uncertain about what was going on as ever. Leaving them with more questions than answers. Leaving them trying to figure out what happens now. Now that their leader, their teacher, their friend, is gone.

As she stands weeping outside the tomb, confused about what has happened, and uncertain as to what to do now, her life feels as empty as the tomb she is standing next to. How many of us have had that same feeling at the loss of a loved one? Be it due to death or even the painful end of a relationship. Leaving us standing at a tomb, be it literal or metaphorical. The emptiness. The sorrow. The pain.

But all that is about to change, when an apparent stranger asks a simple enough question. A question that will change everything. “Whom are you looking for?”

“Whom are you looking for?” These are among the first words that Jesus speaks following his resurrection. Words that set the stage for the first post-resurrection appearance between the Risen Lord and another person. Words that have great significance. Not only in the moment. These are words that stretch both backward and forward in time. These are words that Jesus spoke several other times at other significant encounters during his life and ministry. Echoing the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel according to John. As we are told in the first chapter of John, “John [the Baptist] . . . was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’” (Jn 1.35-38). The words that launched Jesus’ public ministry and prompted him to begin calling disciples of his own. One of the two was Andrew, brother of Simon Peter. The same Peter who becomes Jesus’ chief lieutenant and the one Jesus designated as the rock on which the Church would be built. The same Peter who goes to the tomb on Easter morning after Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty.

“Whom are you looking for?” Also among the last words Jesus speaks before he is arrested and put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. As he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, temple authorities, guided by Judas Iscariot, come to arrest Jesus. When he saw them coming, he “came forward and asked them, ‘Whom are you looking for?’” (Jn 18.4). Words that effectively mark the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the beginning of his Passion.

“Whom are you looking for?” This is a simple enough question. Yet one that can and does, under the right circumstances, change lives. Every time Jesus asks that questions—which really is more rhetorical than literal, having a deeper meaning than just inquiring about the search for an individual—the lives of those who are asked that question are profoundly changed. The first time, it is the lives of those who would become his disciples, who completely upend their lives to follow Jesus. The second time, it is the lives of those who witness and participate in Jesus’ Passion, undoubtedly changing them as they are forced to live with the knowledge that they participated in the death of an innocent man. That they had participated in a gross miscarriage of justice purely out of political motivation. And now, it is the life of a woman weeping in a garden at the loss of her dear friend and teacher whose life is about to be changed.

When it is obvious that Mary does not recognize him, Jesus calls her by name. Something in his voice—perhaps the deep love he has for her, echoing the love she has for him—gently touches her broken heart, bringing healing. Bringing recognition of who he is. Bringing an understanding that only Jesus can provide.

As much as she would like to embrace her Lord and hold on to him lest he disappear again, Jesus has a mission for her. A very important mission. She is, after all, the first witness to the Resurrection. Her job is to go and proclaim what she has witnessed, what she has experienced. Jesus is very specific in his directions. He doesn't just tell Mary to go tell the disciples that he has risen. He tells her, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

This is huge! There is more to this message than meets the eye. This is actually an incredibly powerful message. "Go to my brothers." Never before has Jesus referred to his disciples as brothers. This seemingly simple statement is not merely one of sentimentality. These words are meant to note a change in relationship. No longer is he just their friend, their teacher; he is now their brother. Through his death and resurrection, his relationship with them has been transformed into something deeper, more intimate. They are now truly family. This change in relationship extends beyond just Jesus' relationship with the disciples. It also extends to their relationship with God. Note that he said he is ascending "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Always before, he referred to God as his Father, as his God. Of course, there was an unspoken understanding that God was also their God. But here, Jesus, again, through his death and resurrection, changes that relationship between them and God. Again, that relationship has been transformed into a deeper, more intimate relationship. No longer are they merely servants of God. No longer are they merely those who worship a distant God. They have been brought into the family, into the household, of God. Being recognized as sons of God, just as Jesus is a son of God.

Of course, as elsewhere in Scripture, the disciples stand in for and represent each and every one of us. With his Resurrection, Jesus' relationship with each of us is also changed. We are his brothers and sisters. And God is our Father and our God. Those barriers that had previously been an impediment to our relationship with God are no more. Prior to this, there was so much standing in the way of our relationship with God. Namely sin and death.

The great mystery of Christ's Resurrection that we celebrate this day is that through his death and Resurrection, Jesus defeated sin and death. He broke the hold that sin and death had on humanity from the beginning. Sin creating a barrier between us and God. Preventing us from being able to live into the fullness of what it means to be beloved children of God. And death being the means by which that separation was manifest. But with Christ's triumphing over sin and death, those barriers between us and God are gone. Torn down. Eliminated. Providing us with forgiveness of all our sins. Providing us with the promise of new and eternal life with God. All signs and benefits of the new, deeper, more intimate relationship that we share with God and with Christ. As Brother Todd Blackham of the Society of St. John the Evangelist so beautifully puts it, "Jesus has moved heaven and earth out of the profound longing of God's heart to be reunited with us." Jesus has accomplished what had previously been though unthinkable by doing what had previously been thought to be impossible. All out of love for us.

On this day, we not only celebrate the fact that sin and death have been defeated; that we all our sins are forgiven and that we are given the promise of new and eternal life. We also celebrate our renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. The One who calls us brother, who calls

us sister. The One who invites us into deeper relationship with him. The One who invites us into deeper relationship with his Father and our Father, with his God and with our God. The One who continually comes to us asking “Whom are you looking for?” A question that changes lives. It changed the lives of the disciples whom Jesus called to follow him. It changed the lives of all those involved in his Passion. It changed the life of Mary Magdalene. How we respond will likewise forever change our lives.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!