

April 12, 2020

Sharing the Story...Easter Sunday

Shepherd's Grace Church

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. **11** But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, '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." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20: 1-18)

Christ is Risen! Welcome to Easter! For the past several weeks, I have been welcoming you to Lent. My welcome was intentional, it was practiced and rehearsed. It was offered as a welcome because it seems like nothing else in our lives this Lenten season has been intentional, rehearsed or practiced. For the past several weeks, we have been living in and continue to live in moments of expectation; waiting, watching, wondering what will happen next.

Some of you, I am sure are quite disappointed at not meeting together this morning at the parking lot of our church as we had originally planned. I am disappointed with you, not because we do not need to stay strong and stand together to flatten the curve and get beyond this pandemic. We do. However we had worked out a way to overcome one obstacle and another was placed in our path.

Some are disappointed because we are not able to profess our faith in more traditional ways. I know that for eleven years, we have flown butterflies on Easter Sunday morning. I know we have had prayer vigil on Easter Eve. I know we have had a men's breakfast and there are many other traditions that I, like you have simply taken for granted. I am disappointed that we are not able to observe those traditions this year, but I am confident that God is still in control. I am confident that God will be present for our celebration this morning and that the Holy Spirit will touch you right where you are; that the Holy Spirit will eliminate the miles and we will be joined together in this moment just as we always are when we are standing right next to one another.

So I say again, Christ is risen! Welcome to Easter! As you settle in to that most comfortable chair you have at home and prepare to listen to the rest of service, I believe you will be surprised that right where you are is right where Christ will meet you today! Christ is risen indeed!

Early in the morning, the evangelist says, on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene was on her way to the tomb. Early in the morning...why is that distinction significant to this Easter Sunday? Especially this Easter Sunday? I believe that this year in particular, early in the morning is a particularly important reminder.

During the past several weeks, I am sure some of your routines have changed. I know mine have. I used to get up and run at 5 A.M. during the weekdays. That was my time, my quiet time, my prayer and reflection time and the run helped me move right into that time. Since "shelter in place" however, I find that I no longer have to run that early in the morning. Instead, I can sleep just a little longer or get up and do some things before heading out the door. I have discovered that I kind of like the daylight to run. It is easier to see, and keep an eye on the dog. It is invigorating to see some of nature as I run instead of stepping in it all the time.

What I am trying to say is that my routine has changed and not always for the worst. Still, I do long for the sense of predictability and personal accountability that was present prior to the situation we find ourselves in now.

Mary Magdalene knows routine as well. Early in the morning she rises and starts her day. Perhaps she is familiar with the wonderful song by Jan and Mitch Todd, "How many times can you sleep through the sunrise, you can't see the world if you're looking through closed eyes. There's no inspiration flipping through stations but it's all right there if you only see the signs." Perhaps she knows that the day must begin with a sense of purpose and determination, even if the purpose of her day was in darkness, but I'm not quite sure even she was looking for the signs.

Only three days ago, the light of her life was extinguished when Jesus was crucified. As Mary rises on this Sunday morning, the past few days have dragged on interminably. First was the preparation for the Passover. What a horrible day that was; the meal with Jesus, the betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion! The next day, Passover seder eaten at sunset the day after Christ was crucified. How grim must that meal have been. Finally, the waiting for Sabbath to end so she could go to the tomb and take care of her beloved Jesus.

These would have undoubtedly been some of the activities Mary participated in prior to coming to the tomb early in the morning. They were part of her routine, but more than that, they were a part of God's command to all God's faithful and chosen people. Preparation and Passover were expected...not by family, not by priests, but by God! However, if these events were practiced as a matter of routine, the signs would be missed.

On this Sunday morning, Mary missed the signs. I think we all missed them. How many times did Jesus tell the disciples that the "Son of Man" must be handed over to evil people to be tried, killed and then to rise again after three days? How many times had the disciples heard from him, only to fail to understand. Mary missed the signs. They all missed the signs! We all missed the signs.

If we had not missed the signs, all of us, all of them, all of the world would have been going to the tomb on that Sunday Morning. We would have been lined up for miles just to get a glimpse of what had taken place. It was foretold! It was foretold by Jesus himself and we missed it. How many mornings can you sleep through the Sunrise? You can't see the light if you're looking through closed eyes. Mary was looking through closed eyes on that Sunday morning but she wasn't the only one!

Mary went to the tomb because she was expected to go to the tomb. It was her responsibility...it was what she; what the women did. They went to care for the body and to mourn. The routine was to find the body and prepare it so it could remain for as long as possible before decay.

The actions were a matter of routine. She went to the tomb. She found the body. She anointed the body. She wrapped the body. She wept. She went home. That was what was expected. That was routine. The part of the routine she was uncertain about was "who would roll back the stone." When she arrived, however, she saw that the stone had already been rolled back.

Routine broken, she bent down to look inside. She saw nothing. Perhaps she saw nothing because she expected to see nothing. Because Mary was not looking for anything, she saw nothing. She saw exactly what she was looking for because she was not looking for the signs.

Now, we can only suppose that Mary was present a couple of weeks earlier when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. We can only suppose she heard Jesus tell Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God." (John 11) If she was present at that time, she wasn't paying attention to what had already happened. If she was not present, she certainly was present when Jesus told the disciples that he must be raised from the dead after three days.

Mary was aware, but she was not looking. "How many mornings can you sleep through the Sunrise?" (because you are reading, I can misspell and be correct because you can imagine what I am talking about.) Mary missed the initial moment of resurrection because she was not looking for it. Her actions had become such a matter of routine that when the routine was broken, she assumed something was very wrong.

On this Easter morning, perhaps we can learn a valuable lesson from Mary's actions. This morning, this Easter morning is very different from Easters we have spent together in the past. For the past twelve Easters, we have been gathering at the cross outside the church. We have witnessed miracles there like the year when we could see a figure in the powerpoint slide of the open tomb. We have witnessed coming to faith there like the morning when we baptized Irene at sunrise. We have experienced faith there in that place and it has become a matter of practice for us.

Today, however we are not able to meet in that place. Our routine is broken and our practice of worship is challenged. Does that mean that our faith is lessened? Does that mean that we will not see the Glory of God? The answer to these questions is up to each of us individually. If we believe faith is in the routines we observe, in the traditions we have established, then perhaps this morning will be more difficult for you. If on the other hand, you believe that Jesus not only breaks the chains of Hell and death, but also the chains of tradition and routine that bind us to practice only; if you believe that Jesus allows us to experience the freedom God gave us when we were created in

God's image and likeness (Gen.1) then, today can be a day of joy filled worship of a Christ who has overcome darkness to bring light to the world.

If we can remember today that it is not where we worship, it is not even how we worship, but it is a matter of the authenticity of our worship that matters, then we can experience the Glory of God. If we can remember that once upon a time, the earth was a formless, shapeless void and the Word spoke and all things came into creation (Gen. 1, John 1) and God accomplished that out of nothing (exnihilio) perhaps we can expect God to do it again. Perhaps we can anticipate God's commitment to creation and to life and we can give thanks even before we see. Perhaps in this way we can see the signs.

God's purpose in creating us (humans) in God's image and likeness was to give us freedom. In this freedom, we can choose to believe in God and in God's glory or we can deny that choice and reject God as the one who makes all things possible. (Phil. 4) This morning, on an Easter morning where our hearts are with all who are suffering, with all who are putting their lives on the line for others, with our brothers and sisters who stand with us in worship even though we stand far apart, on this Easter morning the choice is ours. God asks us to choose. Will we see the signs? Will we believe? Will we allow for the Glory of God to be revealed?

When Mary found the stone removed, she ran from the tomb and sought out friends. She found Peter and the "other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved." She explained to them that she had been to the tomb and that someone had rolled the rock away. Note here that in scripture, it does not say that Mary had even looked into the tomb on that first visit. The routine was not what she expected and she could not imagine other possibilities except that something was wrong.

She explained this to Peter and the "other disciple." When the two of them heard Mary's story, they did not stop to consider the signs. Peter failed to remember the rebuke Jesus gave him when he tried to rebuke Jesus. You remember. Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am," and Peter said, you are the Messiah, the son of God." Jesus blessed him and then told him what that meant. "That the Son of Man must be handed over to evil people who would beat him and crucify him and that he would arise in three days."

Peter thought this was terrible and Jesus reminded him rather abruptly that he was seeing things as the world sees them and not as God sees them. God's glory is revealed when we can see things as God sees them. When we can imagine the freedom God has given us to invite the "Kingdom of God" to come near!

Peter did not allow himself to consider the possibility of Jesus' words being prophetic when he heard Mary's story. He missed the sign and as a result, reacted as a person of the world.

The "Other Disciple," did exactly the same thing. The "Other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved," was first introduced to us in John Chapter 11. Mary and Martha, his sisters, sent a note describing him. He was ill and they were asking Jesus to come to him. This same "Other disciple," described in exactly the same way was the one who asked Jesus who would betray Him in Chapter 13. He also stood at the foot of the cross and accepted the charge to be "Son to Mary, Jesus' Mother." This "Other disciple," is Lazarus. He reacted in exactly the same way as Peter.

Lazarus who had been raised from the dead himself, did not see the similarities in the situation presented to him; the rolled away stone, the supposedly empty tomb, the weeping and mourning. It never dawned on him that perhaps there was a prophetic message in the events of this early Sunday morning. The Glory of God, the light coming into the world (John 1, 11) had not yet occurred to Lazarus even though it was a light that the darkness of the world could not overcome.

Peter and the "Other Disciple" started off as much of the rest of the world might have started off. They reacted to the worldly events Mary described and ignored the signs, the special messages God had given to God's faithful, and it is easy to imagine that most of the rest of us would have done the same thing.

On Good Friday, I reminded you of the man who had had his withered arm healed by Jesus. This event happened on the Sabbath and Jesus asked, "which is easier, to heal the arm or to say, your sins are forgiven." We, the rest of the world suppose the thing we can see is easier...the thing we cannot see must not be possible. We forget that through God, all things are possible. In the moment, we believe God might be able to overcome physical ills but we ignore the possibility that God can forgive sins and restore life. We forget that Jesus took all our sins to the cross to him and the God overcame all that sin as Christ was on the cross. We forget the promise Jesus makes to us that "whosoever believes in Him will have eternal life." (John 3)

All of us probably would have reacted in exactly the same way as Peter and the "Other Disciple." We would have assumed that something was wrong because what we expected had not happened. Our expectations would have defined the moment for us just as it did for the two of them.

It is those expectations that we come to this morning. Easter Sunday. Church with friends and family. Sunday dinner. The Masters. A nap. More Masters. (perhaps I am projecting my own expectations on all of you—LOL) Whatever Easter means to you and to your family. All of those expectations are challenged today. Nothing is routine. Let me say that again. NOTHING IS ROUTINE! Everything is exactly as it was on that first Easter Sunday. Nothing was routine. Everything seemed out of synch. The stone was rolled away.

In the uncertainty of this morning, perhaps we can find comfort in the uncertainty of that one. Peter and the Other disciple reacted to the uncertainty by running to the tomb instead of thinking through the events of the past, the message of Jesus and recognizing the signs that were right in front of them. Fortunately, the tomb was a sign as well.

As the two men ran, they ran side by side at first and then the "other disciple" outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He knelt down and looked inside when he arrived but did not go in. We are not told why he did not go in. Perhaps it was in deference to Peter, the leader of the group or perhaps it was in remembrance of his most recent experience at the tomb. In any case, the "other disciple" did not go in but looked inside.

When Peter came, he looked and then went inside. I said the tomb was a sign, but not to Peter. Peter went in and found the burial clothes lying in a pile where the body should have been. No observation is given about Peter's thoughts or feelings regarding this finding. He simply found the clothes. He also found the garment that covered Jesus' head folded neatly and in another place. Again, no observation is given of Peter's reaction. We are simply told what Peter saw. "How many moments can you sleep through the Sunrise? You can't see the light if you are looking through closed eyes."

Peter was not yet open to what he was seeing. It was as if he was the blind man in John Chapter 9. The difference is that he had not yet followed Jesus' instructions to go wash and see. The other disciple, however, came in to the tomb and saw the same things Peter saw. He saw the linens, the head covering and believed. What was the difference for the "Other Disciple?"

I believe the difference is that he had been there. He too was like the blind man but he was like the one who had his sight restored. In fact, he was the one who had his life restored and what he saw reminded him of that which he had participated in. The tomb with the stone rolled back, the clothing that was cut away from him and left in a heap, the head covering that was removed so that he was once again able to see. He saw the tomb and all these things and He believed!

In faith, the "Other Disciple" walked out of the tomb. In disbelief, Peter walked out. From that point, the two went off in different directions. In the uncertainty of the moment, one saw the Glory of God, the other was not sure what he saw. In our lives, many of us react the same way. Some see an event and are moved to faith. Others see the same event and remain unconvinced. That does not mean that those not moved will never be moved, simply that they are not ready. We should not rush to judgment regarding Peter on this day. Instead, we should remind ourselves of the difficulty we face in this moment maintaining our faith in the midst of such uncertainty.

On this Easter Morning and on every morning in our recent past and in our recent future, we are living in uncertain times. We struggle to maintain our positive attitude and we struggle with how God is acting in our current circumstance. We are called to remember that if we have faith, we will see the "Glory of God."

Perhaps as we watch Peter and the "Other Disciple" walk away we should stay for just a moment and watch. Perhaps there is more to learn at the tomb. As we look back, we see Mary standing and weeping. Perhaps as she has watched the events unfold with Peter and the "Other Disciple" she is reminded of something Jesus has said. Perhaps she is just filled with an intense desire to understand why the routine of her morning has been so disrupted.

At any rate, Mary kneels down and looks inside just as Peter and the "Other Disciple." There she sees the signs that were missed by the two men. She sees what appear to be men dressed in dazzling white clothes, one at the place where Jesus' head would be, the other at the feet. These two ask, for whom are you looking?

Imagine Mary's surprise as she sees these two even though she has just seen her two friends leave. Why didn't they see? Why didn't they ask? In her confusion, she returns to her earlier concern. "Where is My Lord?" she asks. "Tell me!" she exclaims! In the excitement of that moment, in her fear and panic, Jesus appears.

Think about your own life. Think about the times when you have been most afraid. Think about the times you have been most uncertain. Think about today...all the questions, all the concerns, all the unusual and in this moment, invite the presence of Jesus. You may not recognize him at first. Mary did not. He might appear in the form of a phone call from a caring friend. He might appear in the gesture of Easter candy from a member of the congregation. He might appear in the music that moves you, that reminds you of "Who rolled the Rock Away!" At first Jesus may not be recognizable to you

but then your name is spoken and your eyes are opened! You see and you believe!

He is alive! He is risen from the dead and he is alive! Feel the same emotions of Mary in this moment. Step to him and desire to cling to him. Allow yourself to be overwhelmed with the blessing of Easter. The tomb is empty! Life is restored...not just life in this world where all hope was gone and is not present again, but life is restored into eternity where there is no death, no sorrow, no heartache, no tears. (Rev. 21) He is alive!

This morning, I have not given you many places from which to enter this story...to share this story. Instead, I have asked you to consider the possibility that there is but one way to share this stage. That one way is the "way, the truth, the Life" that is in Jesus. No other way will invite you to salvation and into the presence of God where, thanks to His work on the cross we are all able to stand upright and in His presence once more.

This morning, welcome to the uncertainty of a day two thousand years ago that invites us to embrace the uncertainty of this morning and look for the signs. Amen!