

Easter Sunday

April 12, 2009

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Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Imagine a child waking up on Christmas morning, or on his birthday, or even this Easter morning, looking for presents and candy and finding nothing. Imagine the disappointment, the sadness, the disbelief – even the anger. Or imagine an adult going to the grave of her brother a couple days after his funeral and finding nothing there but a tipped over tombstone and an empty hole.

Instead of starting with joy and celebration, the Easter story starts with a feeling of loss. Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved approach the tomb and discover the stone rolled away. Mary says, “They have removed the Lord from the grave. We don’t know where they have placed his body.” Easter Sunday begins with an anguished cry of loss - a double whammy – first Jesus is murdered and then they steal his body!

“We cannot find the one whom we have come to see.” This quiet sadness is contrary to the loud celebratory fanfare typical of Easter celebrations today. “Where is his body?” Mary says sadly.

Mary, who has been a faithful and devoted follower throughout Jesus’ ministry, listening to his teaching, preaching, and stories, witnessing his miracles, his suffering and death has today been even more thrown off track – she is grieving. Because we see the Easter story from our perspective, we somehow expect her to understand what’s going on, to understand that Jesus has risen; but she doesn’t.

Mary’s first conclusion is that Jesus’ body has been stolen. She is filled with grief and sadness and, without looking into the tomb, she goes to Simon Peter and the disciples whom Jesus loved, “They have stolen his body.” The first disciple looks in and sees the linen wrappings lying there, but he does not go in. Then Simon Peter goes in the tomb and sees the linen wrappings. Next the other disciple whom Jesus loved goes into the tomb and believes – they then return to their homes.

And Mary is left there alone, still filled with grief. She has already lost Jesus once and now she has lost him again. His life was taken and now his body. She stays there at the tomb, facing her grief.

Mary was confused, scared, full of grief and doubt. Many of us gathered here started out today or maybe even this year scared, confused, and full of grief. Maybe you’ve lost hope. Maybe your

once strong faith has faded. Maybe your optimism has diminished. Maybe your world is upside down.

Jesus has died on the cross and now his body has presumably been stolen. Perhaps this is too much to think about right now and, like Mary, maybe you're asking yourself, "Why am I even here?" "What's the point?"

For too many here today, Mary's grief and dismay might just amplify the grief and heartache you are already experiencing. Today is supposed to be a happy day, but instead seeing the empty tomb is only discouraging. And besides, being at church only brings up old unanswered questions and, spending time with family on such a day, only surfaces old wounds.

You might be feeling despair and sadness today – so is Mary. Her dreams and relationship with Jesus have been truncated, shattered. Mary weeps.

And just like it is sometimes for you and me, Mary shows up today already defeated, and then his dead body isn't even there.

And then Jesus says, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Okay, we know now for sure Jesus has a sense of humor. "Why are you weeping?" And just like we often don't recognize Jesus when he talks to us, Mary doesn't recognize him.

"Mary" – now it clicks – "Teacher!" She knows it's Jesus.

He calls her by name and then immediately gives her a job to do, a message to deliver. Jesus tells her to first share this news with his brothers and then the world. "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

This is Jesus' first teaching after he has been resurrected. "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Jesus' Father is the Father of all. Jesus' God is our God also.

So Mary then goes and tells the disciples what she has seen and been instructed to tell them. What an emotional roller coaster, from unbearable sadness to elation. In the midst of all of this, she faithfully spreads this hopeful message.

Mary is also told not to hold on to Jesus because he has not yet ascended to the Father." It is not done yet. Things are happening, but there is more to get worked out before everything is said and done. Mary can't hold on in the old way.

If she holds on too tightly to life the way it used to be, she might miss the new life that resurrection brings.

"Don't hold on to me," Jesus says: "Go, tell this good news. Go tell them that God is doing something new, and you have seen it.

Go tell others that God is somehow taking Jesus' death and using it to bring new life. Go act like God really is taking what looks like disaster and making it good. God is taking the pain and death that all people face and blessing them – new life starts today.

And even though we might not be in any shape to do so, we are called to go, like Mary, and tell others the good news.

It can be a tall order to go live like God will take whatever difficult, confusing, frightening thing a new day holds and make it good. Yet today, Jesus does give us that resurrection promise, a promise that God's own, resurrected life is coming into our lives.

So, even though we might still be in shock that we find the resurrected Jesus today – we can go faithfully like Mary – telling others that we have seen what the Lord can do, having witnessed God turning death into life. We can go out filled with hope, announcing like Mary, that we have seen the Lord. He is Risen! Amen.