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Easter Sunday – April 24, 2011

John 20:1-18

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

Easter has arrived with a much needed rain. Easter, of course, changes its place on the calendar each year, but just like spring rain you can count on it rolling by. Having been alive on this earth for over 40 years I can remember many Easter services. I'm sure we all can. In fact, they become part of the day, sitting alongside the ham and hot rolls, while we watch the kids hunt for eggs in the yard. We listen to the resurrection story again, perhaps we sing the Hallelujah Chorus while the lilies fill the sanctuary with their fragrant offering. We have all passed our first Easters with someone we love and our first Easters without them. We have come to the service, as we have today, with the experiences of sheer heaven in our lifetimes and the memory of utter hell. Easter is, after all, part of the flow of our lives.

But what does Easter mean to us? As we listened to this resurrection story once again, what did you hear? Was it the first time you had heard John's version, was it the first time in awhile, or was it the first time you had ever heard any story of the resurrection of Jesus? There are many versions of course, at least as many as we have gospels...and a few more beyond what we have included in our own Bible. But they all contend with the same question, just like John does. What does it mean to believe in the risen Christ? Is it an act of will? If someone says to me, "Believe in the risen Christ," is there a switch I can throw that does that? In our often cynical and information overloaded culture, how can you convince anyone of the truth of the Jesus story? Especially the resurrection part? Certainly quoting the Bible won't do it. And what if you really need to believe it? What if you are at the end of your rope, hurting so badly that you need to believe that there is life after what feels like death? What if your hope is dead and you have to believe that it will be raised?

Maybe that's what the disciples felt like on that early Easter morning - a profound feeling of loss, the death of not only their leader, but all of their dreams and hopes as well. Their whole world had collapsed. Jesus was dead, executed like so many before him that had dared to challenge the Pax Romana. Maybe they felt like this whole thing was a lie. There was no "Kingdom of God" there was only the "Kingdom of Rome", and it just won.

They have slunk away to their homes, feeling betrayed and lost, as they hide in fear of their own executions. See that's the way that crucifixions usually worked, they were normally done in big

batches. When Spartacus rebelled against the Roman authorities, it wasn't just him that was punished - 7000 men were crucified along the Appian Way leading into Rome. It was a vivid and horrific form of state sponsored terrorism, designed to keep people in their place. And that's exactly what the disciples were doing on Easter morning...staying in their place.

Except for Mary. There is something about Mary. This piece of scripture represents the only time you see the name of Mary Magdalene in the gospel of John. She is mentioned at the foot of the cross with two other Marys – Jesus' mother and her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas. She is there at the cross with the others and then shows up alone at the tomb the next day. It is Mary who brings the news that maybe Rome hasn't won after all...

This is pretty remarkable geography for a woman who does not appear anywhere else in the gospel. She is there when Jesus dies, and the first witness of the empty tomb. She reports the news of the rolled away stone to Simon Peter and this mysterious “other disciple” and then when they see the empty tomb, they return home. But Mary Magdalene stays...and meets with the resurrected Jesus. She is the first to speak to him. And by Easter Monday she is gone from the record, lost, like so many other women in the pages of our histories.

Then there is this “beloved disciple”, the character in John's gospel who is never named. Scholars have many different opinions, some think he represents the “church”, some that he is John, the author himself, others that he was some unknown priest who followed Jesus secretly. Whatever the case, the beloved disciple comes as a believer...the one whose faith is strong and who throughout the gospel takes what Jesus says to heart and is said to follow it passionately. He sees the empty tomb, and believes...even before Peter, though they still do not understand.

Finally Peter is the third figure at the tomb. Peter, the one who is called “The Rock”...the one who supposedly forms the basis of the Apostles to come...the one on whom the church is founded. Peter sees everything that the other two see and just walks away. There is no commentary. The “beloved one” believes, but no such statement about Peter. He just leaves. Peter is evidence driven, much like we are today. He does not operate on faith so much as verification. He looks in the tomb and sees the evidence – no body, linens lying about – and he leaves the tomb, maybe to search for the body, after all bodies don't just disappear, or maybe to get back to safety in his locked house. But he does not *believe* until much later, when Mary convinces him.

These are our three characters on Easter morning - our three Easter people. First off is Peter, who may be more like us than any of the others. We still wonder what exactly happened on that morning. The documentaries this last week on the Discovery and National Geographic channels try and give us some structure. Scientific studies of the Shroud of Turin, carbon dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls, archeological finds that claim to be the tomb of Jesus...all of these things try and pin resurrection down, they try and fix it, to measure and quantify something that will not be tamed. We get into theological arguments - did the resurrection happen, was it physical or just metaphorical, what is the evidence? The Peter in us reaches for certainty when there is only trust in the amazing newness of God, the capacity for the Creator to create, even out of death. So we retreat and lock our doors for fear rather than revel in the mysterious joy of Easter.

Then there's the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, the one who is always depicted as the most

faithful. He is the disciple who, more quickly than the others, believes. He appears as a character only in John's Gospel and it is this figure that Jesus gives to his mother Mary from the cross as a surrogate son. He is very close to Jesus and needs scant evidence to believe. Perhaps we'd like to think of ourselves as this beloved disciple, maybe he's meant as an ideal model. But we never know his name. So, what if we have this kind of quick faith, this unshakable and deep connection with Christ, and yet we are anonymous? What if this Easter character is meant to show us that we must have more than a close relationship with Christ, more than "Jesus is my homeboy", but that we must be *known* as Christians...public as Christians, on full display with our compassion and love, not anonymous. Like the song we sang here for our Maundy Thursday service, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Perhaps we are not meant, as Jesus once said, to hide our light under a bushel, but to be like a candle on a stand, to be light to the world – something you can hardly do anonymously.

Mary, on the other hand, is the example of unconditional love, love that bleeds and cries and suffers, love that reaches out into the deepest darkness and hopes against all hope. She is love in full public view, staying at the cross and coming to the tomb unafraid, despite the pain. Mary shows us powerful, vulnerable love. It's easy to love a cuddly new baby, but that baby will become a nine-year-old, then a teenager, and will reject your love while needing it desperately. Loving that teenager sometimes takes a hard, very conscious decision, and a willingness to be vulnerable, which is what love ultimately is.

I think that it means something that Mary is the one to whom the resurrection is first revealed, in all of the gospel stories. We live in a culture in which women have far more opportunities than the one that Mary lived in. Women then were barely counted - property of their fathers until they were given to another man with a good dowry and then they became property of their husbands. They had few legal rights and a woman like Mary of Magdala, no husband or father, was really on the outskirts of society. Maybe this is why the tradition wants to make Mary out to be a prostitute, even though the Biblical evidence isn't there. Mary just becomes conflated with all the other Marys in the Bible - an amalgamation of women who didn't quite fit in but followed Jesus with all their hearts. Despite this editing, we can still see glimpses of who she might have been. In her we have one of the primary teachings of Jesus - that all people are created in the image of God, including women - a scandalous part of the Jesus movement that the tradition has tried to edit. She represents what Jesus taught – that it isn't what we look like or who we have been...it is *how we love* that redeems us.

This is why it is Jesus who matters for what is present in Easter's glory is not resurrection itself. Resurrection stories were a dime a dozen in the first century world of the disciples. The question is not, "Can you believe in resurrection", the question is, "Can you believe in *Jesus'* resurrection?" Jesus, after all, was a nobody. They could believe then that Julius Caesar was resurrected or that Hercules has escaped the grasp of death, seeing their fallen heroes as immortal, like we do with Elvis. But Jesus? He hung out with the lepers and the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the Samaritans...he was no hero. He was a nobody who convinced so many that they were somebody to God. It is crucial to understand that Jesus' resurrection is **NOT** just about "love is stronger than death," important as that may be. That truth could have been learned by the Lazarus story. It is because it is *Jesus* who is resurrected, it is Jesus' counter-cultural ministry that is validated. God's love for the world; God's desire for justice, peace, and well-being is shown to be un-killable; it is stronger than the worst the world can do.

Resurrection becomes God's vindication of Jesus, God's "YES" to what Jesus stood for - the approval of the Jesus plan. And it comes to us first and foremost in the presence of a marginalized, stereotyped woman who has since been almost erased from history. But try as we might, God will not be placed in a box, confined by our rules, or limited by our capacity to understand. God will break through, like on that Easter morning, and tell us again – Behold! I am doing a new thing, can you not perceive it?

What I really think matters is that we *experience* the resurrection, not that we can define it. What matters is that we know that being a Christian means being Easter people, living out the same "yes" to the Jesus plan that God said on that first Easter...knowing that *whatever* happened on that first Easter morning, the disciples knew that something was different. Rome had not won. Jesus was alive – and so were they.

On Easter morning, God says "yes" to compassion, non-violent resistance to oppression, and the kinds of caring that only a community who values one another can do. God said “yes” to the Jesus plan. And Easter, my friends, is not just a singular event, it is a way of life. We are Easter people - we live through the service and communion of Maundy Thursday, the despair of Good Friday, the shock and fear of Holy Saturday and the turn of Easter morning...we feel as though we are on trial at times, unjustly accused, facing unfair odds and at our darkest times we are even reduced to shouting out, "My God, why have you forgotten me?" Our lives mirror Holy Week - the regular flow interrupted by tragedy, the promise of something new broken with an unexpected setback. But we are Easter people. We learn to expect that there will be a dawn where the unimaginable happens, where life springs from death and where the good news comes to us from the most unexpected places, carried by the most unanticipated voices, coming like the long prayed for rain, finally falling softly on our thirsty ground. For Easter is how we live.

More than the empty tomb, this is the sign of resurrection. Wendell Berry says it best in his poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”, which bears repeating from this pulpit:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion - put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?

Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.

Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,

lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.

Practice resurrection.

**Benediction: He is risen...risen in all of us...risen in how we will be in the world. Hallelujah.
Go in peace, pray for peace and love one another...every single other. AMEN.**



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