



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter Day (A)

Responding

[RCL] Acts 10:34-43 or Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10

Easter is one of those occasions on which most folks come to church already knowing the story. Due to their familiarity with the Easter narratives, some in our number might be tempted to let their minds wander during the reading of the scriptures. There is certainly no shortage of auxiliary matters competing for our attention on Easter morning: congregants dressed in vibrant pastels; the smell of lilies wafting from the altar; perhaps even a brass instrument or two. Still, as Christians, we ought not to underestimate the power of scripture, no matter how familiar it may be.

For example, each of this morning's readings declares something of the richness of that eternal life into which we walk with the Risen Christ this day—and every day—of our lives.

From the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Peter preaching the message of God's peace in Jesus Christ. "*God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear . . . to us who were chosen by God as witnesses . . . He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify.*" Here, in the full light of the Resurrection, Peter is doing precisely what Jesus told him to do—witnessing to it.

From the Letter to the Colossians, we hear the assurance that we are raised with Christ. There is no more waiting. We are inheritors of resurrection life *now*. So, when it comes to being compassionate, kind, humble, patient, and loving, there's no time like the present.

Both of these readings are to be commended for further prayer and study. But this morning, the resurrection account from John's Gospel deserves a more fulsome exploration, especially given its relative familiarity to us.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been rolled away from it. With the news that the Lord's body is gone, she runs to Peter and John (or, as he's called here, "the disciple whom Jesus loved"). Deciding that they need to see it for themselves, these two disciples run to the tomb and find it empty, just as Mary said they would. The linen wrappings are lying right there inside, but there is no body to be found.

One thing we might miss because of our previous experience with this passage is that Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John each have a different reaction to the empty tomb.

John, the text tells us, “saw and believed” as soon as he entered the tomb. Until this point, the disciples had not understood what had been told to them—that Jesus must rise from the dead. Apparently, this is when it clicks for John—right as it’s unfolding before his eyes.

As for Peter, the scripture isn’t as explicit. Maybe he gets it. Maybe he doesn’t. It would seem as though he has some more thinking to do. He and John both return home.

Mary, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to get it at all. At least, not yet. And can she be expected to, amid the shock of these pre-dawn hours? It’s no wonder she remains at the tomb to weep. Thinking his body has been carried away, she is left to lament the fact that she has lost Jesus a second time.

It can be tempting for us to try to identify with the major players in this or any of our more familiar scriptures. In search of a way to connect at a deeper level with prominent biblical figures, we may find ourselves wanting to determine which ones we are most similar to and why. This is the sort of thing we do when we ask ourselves, “Am I a Mary or a Martha?” upon hearing the familiar account of Jesus visiting the sisters’ home in Bethany.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the desire to relate to a particular individual in this or any other biblical passage. But by doing so, we may run the risk of limiting our perspective when instead we are called to expand it—perhaps in this case by finding points of connection with several of the people we encounter.

Take for example the three disciples we meet today. Are we not, each of us, some combination of John, Peter, and Mary Magdalene? It might depend on the season of our life, or our time and location along the path of our Christian journey.

We are John when we see something and believe it. We are John when the object of our heart’s desire dawns on us in real-time, when the realization of it causes all the puzzle pieces to fall right into place. We are John when we arrive on Easter morning without one shadow of a doubt that Jesus is risen.

There was a woman who, not too terribly long ago, sat alone by a hospital bed where her husband of 61 years lay dead. It had only been a few minutes since his passing when the chaplain walked in to see her, but before he could speak, she put her hands up quietly and gently shook her head. “I know where my husband is,” she said, sternly. “If you want to find somebody who needs convincing, you’ll have to go someplace else.”

We are John when we rest certain and secure in the bonds of our belief.

We are Peter when we are not quite as certain. Peter when it takes just a little longer to sort it all out.

The story is told of a young girl, maybe three or four years old, who went to Sunday School and church with her grandmother one Easter morning. On the way, her grandmother explained to her the story of Jesus' resurrection, including his death on Good Friday. "Then, early on Sunday morning," she said, "he came back to life!" The little girl stared up at her grandmother with a look teetering on the soft edge between innocence and confusion . . . "Yeah right!" she exclaimed.

Apparently, she needed a little bit more time to think it over.

And we are Mary when our grief overcomes our ability to make sense of the mystery of eternal life. We are Mary when a loved one dies and our grief overwhelms our other senses. From time to time, and for good reason, we all lose the ability to perceive something that is right in front of us, even if that something is the presence of God.

We find ourselves, each of us, in different places on our Christian journey at different times. That's just fine. Even on Easter. You might well be able to run toward the empty tomb with an undefended heart, predisposed to belief even before you get a look at the evidence. Or perhaps once you arrive, you'll need to turn away in confusion. You simply might need to take some time to sort out what's happened and then come back later. That would be fine, too. Lord knows there are those of us who will need just a little bit more time to hang around outside and cry.

None of our possible responses changes the truth of the matter—that whoever you are, wherever you are, Jesus is right there by your side. You may not always perceive him. He is there, nonetheless. He is waiting to say your name, and—even when you least expect it—to remind you of the faith you have deep inside. That faith which can only have been instilled by the one through whom all things were made. That faith which is all that is necessary to go out and proclaim the One who lives.

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