

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, April 16, 2017 – Easter

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ — he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

John 20:1-18

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. So 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on

Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and 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. They 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." When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus 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.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Let us pray...Amen.

Just two days before, Jesus had been crucified, and had died, and was placed in a tomb. The disciples did the only thing they could think of, which was to go home. Go home to their families, to their routines, to some kind of normalcy. To some kind of safety. Perhaps they thought it was all over. That with the death of Jesus died the ministry, the prophecy, the miracles, and teaching.

Mary may have gone home, but something drew her back to the tomb. Our gospel lesson doesn't say, but it was written 60 or 70 years after all this had happened. It's hard to imagine the writer even being alive when all this happened.

But Mary couldn't sleep. Restless like many of us when we lose someone we love, she went to the last place she saw Jesus. Like those of us who visit the graves of our loved ones, perhaps she sought comfort in that final resting place. It would have been quiet. Like our cemeteries are quiet.

The gospel tells us that when she got to the tomb, the stone that covered the opening had been rolled away. Was she frightened? Was she heartbroken? Was she angry? She went and told Peter, and another disciple many think was John, that someone had removed Jesus' body.

Peter and John ran as fast as they could to see for themselves. John got there first, and looked in. Peter arrived, and he went in. Peter was the first to see the linen wrappings that had been used as a shroud, lying there, no longer covering Jesus.

John found the courage to go in, and when he saw the empty tomb, he believed.

Having run to the tomb, and after finding it empty, Peter and John didn't know what else to do, so they went home again.

But Mary stayed. And when she took her turn looking into the tomb, she saw two angels, sitting where Jesus had been placed. They asked her why she was weeping, and she told them, that someone had taken Jesus away, and she did not know where he was.

And in that moment of confession, in that split second of saying she did not know where he had been laid, he appeared. Not recognizing him, she mistook him for the gardener. In many ways, Mary was right. Jesus was and is a gardener.

Like a gardener, Jesus plants, nurtures, feeds, waters, and prunes us. His compassion, his forgiveness, his peace are all the spiritual food we need.

When the soil around us is depleted, he amends it. He disturbs the soil in which we are planted so that our roots can breathe. We are sometimes the objects of his ministries, and sometimes we're the water, and nutrients for others. Jesus is very much like a gardener.

Of all the disciples, of all those whom he loved, Jesus chose to reveal his resurrected self first to Mary Magdalene. Not Peter, not John, not Martha or Lazarus, but Mary. The one who came to the tomb for comfort, who stayed around long enough to meet Jesus.

Mary didn't just peer into the empty tomb and go home. She stayed, in the midst of her mourning, in the midst of her sadness, in the midst of her fears, she stayed. What courage, what faith. What strength and conviction.

And because Mary had remained, Jesus trusted her to share the news with the others. It was left to Mary to go back to the disciples, and tell them the truth about Jesus: that he lives. That death could not contain him.

If you had to pick one of the characters from this story, who do you think you would be? John? Peter? Mary?

John heard that Jesus was gone, and he ran as fast as he could to get to the tomb. He even outran Peter. But when he got there, his courage failed and he didn't go in.

Peter wasn't as fast as John, but when he did arrive at the tomb, he had the courage to go in and see for himself what had happened.

Mary was there first, saw that the stone had been rolled away, and was the first to tell the disciples that something was amiss. Mary was the first to see Jesus, to recognize him, and was the first to tell the others that Jesus had risen.

Speedy, but fearful, like John, slower, but with more courage, like Peter or present to receive the newly risen Christ in the midst of deep sadness and fear, like Mary...

Each of us must peer into the empty tombs of our lives from time to time. We all have dark and empty places, where something important used to be. Sometimes we get there in a hurry, but we don't want to look in. Sometimes we finally get there, and take a deep breath and look in. Rarely, are we waiting outside that empty tomb, and rarely, because we are in the right place at the right time, do we meet Jesus there.

Empty tombs. What empty tombs? A lost job. A lost relationship. A death of a loved one. An addiction. An illness. Maybe even an empty church sanctuary. The list goes on, and each one of us has countless empty tombs littering our horizon.

And if we are honest, if we take a sober look at the way we encounter our empty tombs, we'd probably have to say that we're more like John or Peter in the way we treat them: we look in briefly, maybe receive some insight, and go home.

Very few of us have the courage, or the strength to hang around such a vivid and painful reminder of loss as an empty tomb.

But with our gospel lesson this morning, we now know that if we wait outside the empty tomb, facing our fears, peering into the unknown, like Mary did, the truth will appear to us. We might not recognize it at first. We might think the truth is something else, but being in the right place at the right time isn't just dumb luck, it's sometimes just sheer perseverance!

The disciples didn't know what else to do. It didn't make sense to just hang around the tomb, much less an empty one. That seems like most of us: who wants to hang around an empty tomb, being reminded of all that pain and suffering? Nobody.

But when we can, and when we do, the reward is nothing less than a miracle: facing our fears, confronting our worries and anxieties, we can know the truth: all is not lost. Because Jesus lives, we live also. Because Jesus triumphed over death, our sins are forgiven. Our fears relieved. Our faults and shortcomings accepted without judgment.

The message Jesus gave Mary was profound. And it has profound implications for the way we live our lives: Jesus told Mary not to cling to the 'old' Jesus, the old ways. That with his ascension to be with God, he was a 'new' Jesus.

But oh how we love to cling to the old ways! Even in the face of evidence that God does new things, in new ways, every day, aren't we all convinced in some way or another that the old ways are the best ways? It's human nature. We cling to the old Jesus as if that's the only Jesus there is. We try and keep him close to us for comfort, but the truth is that he will have to ascend to heaven sometime, and clinging to the old Jesus won't bring us any relief from our fears and worries.

So while many of us would have to confess a likeness to John or Peter when it comes to peering into the empty tombs of our lives, many of us are like Mary when it comes to clinging to the old Jesus, the one who walked with us before his ascension.

Jesus was clear with Mary, don't cling to the Jesus you knew before, and go and tell the others what you now know.

And that message is for us, here, today: The Easter message of hope resides in the new Christ, the newly risen Christ, not the old Jesus. The Easter message of new life resides in the new Christ, the newly risen Christ, not the old Jesus. The powerful Easter message of forgiveness resides in the new Christ, the newly risen Christ, not the old Jesus.

This is not easy stuff: if we have enough courage to hang around the empty tombs of our lives long enough to meet Jesus, the message we get is nearly impossible to follow: don't cling to the old ways, it's the newly resurrected Jesus that we must follow, the new way, the new life, the new covenant. God is creating new ways for us to worship, to celebrate, and honor the risen Christ, and we must not cling to the old Jesus if we wish to move on.

Whether we know it or not, we all have many empty tombs in our lives. I would hope that we could each look at one today, or maybe this week. Look into one empty tomb that has been bothering us, and wait around it

long enough to encounter Jesus. Even if he doesn't tap us on the shoulder, we know the message he'll give us: don't cling to the old understanding, living the new life means letting go of the old Jesus, letting go of the old grudge, letting go of the past hurts, or the gnawing fears, or the crippling anxiety.

Mary had it right. Peter and John had to wait a little longer before Jesus came to them in person. But ultimately, he came to them, just like the others, just like he'll come to us, too. And his message will be the same: look to live in the new life, look to live in the new covenant, look to honor the risen Christ, not by clinging to the Jesus who lived among us, but by obeying the one who triumphed over death, who secured our forgiveness by sacrificing his life for us.

Hope, new life in Christ, forgiveness. Easter gifts for us, and Easter people. Thanks be to God. Amen.