

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Easter Day, 2010
TEXT: John 20:1-18
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody! Happy Easter! Goodness, it's a beautiful day out there! Just about the most perfect kind of day to celebrate Easter that we could imagine. All that snow seems a long time ago, doesn't it...

We're glad you are here to be with this people. Because it's a good day. We're especially delighted if you are here for the first time. Christ Church is an almost seventeen year old congregation, filled with people who remember what it's like to walk into a church for the first time ever. Every one of us did it. So we know it takes a lot of courage to walk through the doors of a church you've never been with before. If that's you today, we want to know we're really glad you did.

Because we were born to be here; we exist for this neighborhood, and we want people to know how much God loves everybody; and that means how much God loves you. Maybe you experience a lot of love in this world; maybe you don't. Maybe you're broken today; maybe you're filled. I don't know. But no matter what's going on, the Good News of Jesus is the Good News of God's love.

We believe that powerfully around here; and on Easter Day we celebrate that nothing stops that love--ever. Not even death. No stone is big enough, and no tomb is dark enough, to imprison God's love and mercy and grace.

And if you forget everything else I say this morning, or anything we do--we hope you'll remember that. Especially if you are here for the first time. It's a new day, and a new beginning--through the work of a Lord who is more powerful than the grave.

Now we do a bunch of things in our worship service: We sing, and pray, and share in the Lord's Table. And here what we do is dwell in the scriptures a bit. We linger in the word, and meander through the story. Because when we do that, God's story intersects with our story.

And we each got our stories. We each bring something to the table this morning--we're bringing some things that a lot of people know about; we're bringing some things that only a few people know about; and we're bringing some things we've kept to ourselves, and kept in the dark.

Because there is such a thing as darkness, and those of us who love Jesus know about it. You see, Christians aren't immune to the vicissitudes of life; and we don't pretend. We are unabashed realists. We know that everything isn't always the way it's supposed to be; that things get thrown at us, and that life can sometimes be a mess. If you plopped a stake in the ground right where this altar table is; and then drew a circle around it with a one mile radius, somewhere in that circle this Holy Week a lot of good things happened, that's for sure. But also, someone lost their job; someone got a bad report from the doctor; someone got a phone call about someone they love they didn't want to get; someone shouted when they should have listened; someone looked around at a pretty comfortable life and wondered if this is all there is. Somewhere in that circle, there was the darkness of forgotten hope and the anxiousness that comes when we think we're all alone.

And because that's the way human life is sometimes, that's exactly where this part of God's story begins.

Let's do a little Easter Day Bible! There are lots of unique things about the way John tells this story. Here are three of them:

1. It's not a group of women who go to the tomb here. It's only one; all alone, all by herself.
2. Mary Magdalene doesn't go to dress the body for burial. Maybe she goes because she is heartbroken, and so sad at the death of her Master that she can't leave him, even if he's dead and behind a rock. But really, we aren't given a reason; maybe because she doesn't know why either.
3. And while the other gospel writers let us know that sun was rising when the tomb was first visited, here Mary goes when it's still dark.

Because really, that's where most of the great stories of hope and promise and freedom begin--alone, in the dark, and not quite sure what we're doing there.

It's not an easy place to be. Never met someone who likes being in that place, and haven't met too many people who've never been there.

It's a place where the "frenzies" sometimes hit. You know...we get so discombobulated and don't know what to do so that the only thing we know how to do is run around.

I mean, look at how much running around goes on here. Mary runs to tell Peter and the other disciple that the body is gone; then they run to the tomb—but not together, and apparently leaving Mary behind; so at some point she gathers up her skirts again and races back. One of them gets there first, but won't go in. The one who arrives second does. One of them believes, but neither of them understands. Mary finally gets there to see the others on their way back home for some reason we can't fathom. If you're willing to have a sense of humor about these things, the chaos is really quite funny. Except when we're in the middle of it; except when we're at such sixes and sevens that our minds won't stop racing and we're running around hoping that if we just do this or that we'll figure it out.

You see, maybe there's something worth paying attention to here--it's when Mary gives up, and finally does nothing but stand there by herself and cry that the darkness takes its first hit. Nobody likes to be in that place when there's nothing left. But that seems to be about the time when if we listen, we'll hear our name said.

I don't know how Jesus said her name in that garden. Maybe it was with incredulity that she didn't recognize him; maybe it was with the beseeching warmth of a best friend; maybe it was just a whisper because that was all she could handle. I don't know. But she's lost, and alone, and confused, and weeping--and he just says "Mary."

It's big here today. Maybe hard to find a parking spot. The music's big; and there are a lot of us here; and the sun is shining; and the flowers are beautiful; and it's the perfect day to shout "Alleluia! Christ is Risen."

But that garden is a smaller place. And we live most of our lives in those smaller places. There's no Ed McMahon announcing "here's Jesus;" no "Hail to the Chief;" the angels make their appearance and then are gone. Just a garden, and a name that reveals more about who says it than who hears it.

Maybe it's that way to remind us that it's in those small and lonely crevices in life that we're most likely to find the living Lord; that when we're at the end of our tether, and all alone in our closet, and feel like we're losing hope, and darkness seems to be getting the best of us...that when we listen closely in those moments—that's where we'll hear him say our name,

and see that he was there all the time, but we just didn't recognize him; and that Easter isn't a single day, but a reality that exists forever.

You see, if this is the first time you've been to worship in a while know that this is the day we celebrate that darkness and death—literal death and metaphorical death—never stays, and never wins. Not for you; not for me; not for those in our neighborhood today who are afraid and having a hard time getting out of bed this morning; not for the entire world.

In fact, it's bigger than just us. War doesn't win; poverty doesn't win; hunger doesn't win; violence doesn't win; disaster doesn't win--none of those manifestations of darkness are victorious in the end because "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!"

You see, one more time it's a new day. Every day is a new day. Every day, the light of Jesus shines into every nook and cranny. The kingdom of God isn't just coming. It's also here. And we have been made free. That old stuff that has possessed us...the lingering fears, the bitter disappointments, the lost dreams, the anger and cynicism that comes because things aren't the way we think they should be--all of that is crushed by an empty tomb. It is new heavens and a new earth God declares in that reading from Isaiah. The former things are behind us.

I think that's why Jesus tells Mary to not hold onto him. She's trying to hold onto what's old. But this is a brand new life Jesus gives—moving forwards, not backwards.

We ain't going back; and we're not even standing still. Mary isn't allowed to stay comfortable. This story ends with a command. Good news, everybody. The Resurrected Lord gives each of us something to do that makes a hugely good difference to someone else. We do not waste away when we choose to follow Christ, and we are not commanded to either stay put. He does not stay stuck, and because he doesn't we are made free—not just free from, but free for...

If God's love is an eternal truth—and it is—so is it an eternal truth that the Resurrected Jesus asks of us that we give this love to others...which is really important, because there are those in this neighborhood who need it, just like us. They may be a bit frenzied, or they may just be weeping all by themselves.

But not for long, because Jesus is Risen and he's got a job for us to do. And we can do that--like Mary, we can let go a little bit, take a step, and share the love. That's living out Easter. Because if this day begins with Mary weeping, and wondering where he has been laid; it ends with the declaration that death is dead; life has won; and Christ has conquered.

Happy Easter, everybody. May it be for each of us a blessed Easter Day. May we sing with gusto; and pray with all our hearts; and receive from this table; and share in a feast later today with family and friends; and eat lots of candy; and go for a walk; and laugh and smile and play a bit. All those are good ways to celebrate that Christ is Alive!

And when the moment of quiet arises, may it be we listen closely. He says our names as surely as he said Mary's. And he also says "go!"