

March 22, 2008 - Easter Vigil
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Romans 6.3-11
Psalm 114
Matthew 28.1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

INTRODUCTION

If you came tonight expecting to hear the story of our faith and experience the drama of our devotion, then you won't be disappointed.

As we have listened to the retelling of God's dealings with Israel, and then moved into the excitement of having these seven people baptized into Christ and marked as his forever, the intensity of the moment is impossible to avoid. The tangible emotions we have experienced are omnipresent.

We have heard tonight about the two strongest emotions known to human kind.

The first unavoidable emotion is fear. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve learned to be afraid, and ever since human beings have always been afraid of one thing or another.

Yet fear is not the only emotion that begs for our attention. Also there is love. Ever since the beginning of time, love has been both the emotion and the conviction fueling most of our human activities.

Tonight, at Easter 2008, LOVE and FEAR have come together in a strong mix of emotions. Ultimately there is love, but first there is the fear.

You see the fear in this story when Mary, about whom we know very little; save that she was from the town of Magadela which was known for its activities of ill repute, encounters the angel in dazzling bright garments. In street language, it's fair to say that Mary was probably scared out of her wits! But somehow Mary's fear sets her apart from the others around Jesus. This is the same Mary who, while the male disciples were fearfully cowering from the Romans leaders and chief priests, was suffering with Jesus at the foot of his cross.

If that was not enough, then she is confronted by Jesus himself. As the fear continues to take hold of her the resurrected Jesus tells her to not be afraid, but to go to, of all places, Galilee to tell the story to all of Jesus' brothers.

Up to the moment of Mary's encounter with Jesus, there had been another fear: the fear of abandonment. Mary is the first to reach the empty tomb and the first to weep over Jesus. Mary is a woman experiencing intense grief one moment and love the next. Her tears of weeping come from the shattered dreams that make her heart bleed.

Abandonment is a pain in the heart. In our story at the empty tomb, this greatest of all human losses had actually happened. Mary's Jesus had been killed and she had been killed. Mary knew her Lord was gone – she had been abandoned. However, Mary was not alone in her distress. Other Gospel renditions of the Easter story tell us that Peter and the other disciples were experiencing much the same feelings of abandonment. Though they reacted differently, they felt – at the center of their hearts – abandonment.

Decades ago the late Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a book about the five more-or-less standard stages of death, grief and loss. These stages are standard because most of them happen to most of us when we have a significant loss: DABDA.

For Mary, these emotions must have been very real; they were more than mere stages to her. As far as anger is concerned, I can only imagine that she and the others had been quite engaged in spreading around the blame that frequently occurs during the ANGER phase. Though we 21st Century Christians might be tempted to clean this story up and think that in the interlude between crucifixion Friday and resurrection Sunday everyone was sitting around talking about how God's marvelous plan was unfolding before their very eyes – give me a break! These people were a whole lot more like you and me than we like to believe. I suspect that such spiritual reflection could not have been farther from the truth and reality of what the followers of Jesus experienced on these three days between death and resurrection.

Hell hath no fury like the scornful blame of grief. Have you ever been around people for whom this kind of grief just blurts out? Probably the most intense may be that of a parent when a son or daughter dies. It just blurts out. Frequently this grief can't be held inside. Rare is the parent who has the restraint to keep those feelings inside. For most healthy parents and others the restraint will come in due time. We have seen this angry blame in contemporary news stories and we have seen it in our neighborhoods.

But we've also seen it in the scriptures.

Remember when it was announced to Jesus that his friend Lazarus was very ill and that he should come quickly to bring him back to life? By the time Jesus arrived at Lazarus' home in Bethany, Lazarus had died. Jesus was met by Lazarus' sister Martha who said to Jesus, "...Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11.21b) Now you can interpret Martha's words in any way you want. However, as I read them

the only conclusion I can come up with was that Martha was engaged in an angry statement of blame. Martha was grieving, and she was angry – at Jesus.

At the tomb there was plenty of anger at those were thought to be responsible for Jesus' death. When the anger at the others – the Sanhedrin, Pilate, the Pharisees – had run its course, then the most dangerous anger of all is prone to arise: anger at self. Depression-prone self-anger and loathing usually starts out with a sentence something like, "If only I had" Then we can critique ourselves on those things "left undone."

The pain experienced by Mary and the disciples occurred within them for a good reason. They had taken the risk to love – to care deeply about another human being. They had chosen to care deeply about Jesus. Though we may not want to feel the pain of such a loss, the only way in this life to avoid such pain is to refuse to love.

Have you ever heard a person say, usually during and in the midst of grief and loss that I will never love again because it just hurts too much when something happens to separate me from the one whom I love? The irony is that since love is such a central component of being human, it may be impossible not to love. When I hear a person say, "I'll never love another," it is an alarm – loud and clear – in my head, in my heart and in my soul. That alarm tells me that I am in the presence of a person who is about to engage in unspeakable pain. I know that everyone whom I have known to say, "I'll never again love another," and tries to live out a non-loving life is thoroughly miserable. There is only cure and release for this pain, and you know what it is. It is to love again!

At times it takes a shock to bring someone out of the grief. The "weeping" Mary is brought out of her grief and loss when confronted by the angel at the tomb: "Don't be afraid!" Then later on the road to Galilee she is confronted by Jesus who also tells her not to be afraid. When Mary looked into Jesus' face, when she experienced the embrace of his love, she could feel her broken heart begin to be healed by his touch.

These two confrontations will not only change Mary's life and the lives of Jesus' first century followers, but will change the lives of the lives of people at Galilee Church today. Indeed we are right to believe that today, Mary has come to Galilee to tell us all about the good news that Jesus is risen today. Through this affirmation we joyfully and exuberantly express our faith :

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

In these few words Mary had been introduced to a new reality. The reality was and is that because of Jesus' promise of his eternal presence with us, a window has been opened for us to enter into a new and whole way of life. Though we still can and do grieve during our sojourn on "...this earth our island home," as people transformed by the power of the cross and empty tomb of Christ Jesus, we grieve as people who have hope. Our hope is in the risen Lord who lives in us and at this altar. Jesus lives in bread and wine – body and blood – and lives within us.

Mary Magdalene, it could be argued, was the first evangelist after the resurrection. After meeting God's angel and then Jesus, Mary left the empty tomb to go to Galilee and ANNOUNCE to the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord Jesus. He lives!

The remarkable thing is that Mary took on the role of faithful evangelist right after she had gone through what may have been the most chaotic period of her entire life: life at the foot of the cross. Isn't the healing touch of Jesus' presence remarkable!

Unto himself Jesus gathers all sorts and conditions, all kinds and varieties of men, women, and children – all of them in one way or another broken, hurt and in pain. Those who are drawn to the master through the waters of baptism may be the ones who are "heavy laden," who bear the heavy loads of life. Nevertheless, Jesus cries out to them and to us, "Come unto me." Jesus wants us to know that in a most personal way, he died that we might have life.

Mary is confronted with the new life that Jesus offered her and offers us. This oddly new gift of God's peace and companionship is now offered in a way never before seen by the people of the world.

Mary got the message and took it to the others.

But enough about Mary. What about you?

Just as Mary was a witness to the events of the resurrection, so are you. Go ahead and tell the story. One of my foremost dreams is to be with a congregation of people, perhaps Galilee people, who are so inspired by this resurrection story that they, like Mary of old, cannot wait to get out the door of the church so they can tell the story.

Are you those people? Yes, by all means you are those people! Go ahead and do it! Go ahead and tell the story!

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