

“He Is Risen—Alleluia!”

Sunday, April 4, 2010—Easter Sunday

*John 20:1-18*

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Those of you who know me, know that every Wednesday I spend some time telling Bible stories and singing Christian songs with the 2, 3 and 4-year-olds in our daycare center. One of the things I love about this time is that the stories are all new and exciting to them. When I talk about the empty tomb, they are riveted. When I show them the pictures of the angels in the story Bible, their eyes get big and round and their faces reflect the awe they feel. They know they are hearing something that is both amazing and mysterious, and that it is terribly important.

It’s a little different for us, isn’t it? All of us know the story’s basic outline. Most of us have heard it many times before. Perhaps in this age of skepticism, resurrection evokes more doubts for us than it does awe and wonder. Perhaps your expectation for this morning is that I’ll try to talk you out of your doubts, so I better tell you right up front that’s not my approach on Easter. For years pastors regularly devoted their Easter sermons to enumerating all the rational and scientific proofs why people should believe in resurrection. Sometimes they took hours to get through it all, after which I suspect nobody much cared. I won’t try to explain resurrection logically, because some truths are just too big and too mysterious for rational explanation. Our words and thoughts aren’t big enough. Our children haven’t lost their capacity for awe and wonder. For the rest of us, I sometimes think we need the music and the flowers and sacraments more than the words. Sometimes I think it would be better on Easter morning to skip the words altogether and just concentrate on the wordless ways of celebrating what God has done.

But there is a reason why so many of us are here this morning, and I don’t think it’s just that it’s what we’re used to doing before we settle down to enjoy the ham and jello salads and bite off the ears of the chocolate rabbits. We come here on Easter to hear words of life in the face of death. As we sit here on Easter morning, some of us are without jobs. Some of us are facing serious illness. Some of us are grieving the loss of beloved friends and relatives. Some of us are grieving dreams that have crashed and burned, and trying to cope with the bitterness, the anger and the isolation that follow.. Some of us are just exhausted from trying to cope with the stresses of a world that increasingly seems out of control. And if we have been spared the worst of these things, then surely we know those who have been less fortunate.

So I think we can understand some of what Mary Magdalene must have been feeling in the pre-dawn hours of that first Easter morning. According to John, she came alone and in the dark. She sees that the stone has been removed from the tomb, so she runs to get some of the others. You can hear her wailing voice, echoing the brokenness of her heart: “They’ve taken him out of the tomb! He’s gone! We don’t know where he is!”

Mary has witnessed the terrible crucifixion. The horror of it is still fresh; after all, she was the one who stayed behind and watched while all the others ran off to hide and cower

in fear. Jesus was her beloved teacher and friend. When he died, so much died with him. It wasn't just his love for her, the way he valued her gifts. It was the whole different life he'd showed her, a life where love is stronger than hate and wealth has less to do with what you own and more to do with what you give away. Now all that's gone.

And it gets worse. Now it looks like his body is gone, too.

Surely there must be an explanation. Someone must have sneaked in during the night and stolen the body. The other disciples look in the empty tomb and leave, but Mary remains there, weeping and grieving. And when she looks up from wiping her swollen eyes, she sees two angels there, who want to know the reason for her tears. And again we hear: "They've taken my Jesus away! I don't know where he's gone!"

Isn't that the question we're asking, too? Where is Jesus when you've lost someone, or something, that meant everything to you? Where is Jesus when it feels like the bad news will never stop? Where is Jesus when you're not sure you can go on?

Mary Magdalene turns around and sees Jesus himself standing there. She doesn't recognize him. Not only does she think he's the gardener, she's pretty sure he must be the one responsible for stealing the body. "Tell me, sir, where you've put him. Bring back the body, sir, so I can finish getting it ready for burial. Do it now, nobody else has to know. I won't tell anyone, I just want my Jesus back."

Mary's stuck on Good Friday. The Jesus she knew is dead. Her relationship with him is dead, too, or so she thinks. All that's left to do is to finalize the loss, find the body and bury it. That's what we do, when someone is dead. That's how we get closure. Mary is thinking death, not resurrection.

Jesus says her name. Mary. It's me, Jesus. I am alive. I am here with you. Now Mary does recognize him, but she's still thinking the Jesus of the past has returned. She can't quite get her arms around a resurrection, but still she's overjoyed to see Jesus and runs to throw her arms around him. But Jesus gently disengages from her grasp. Mary, you must let go of me, you cannot hold on to me, he says. Don't cling to the past; our relationship is different now. If you keep on clinging to the crucified body, if you keep trying to hold on to the past, if you keep trying to recreate what used to be, you'll miss Easter. You'll see the risen Christ right before your eyes and you'll mistake him for the gardener. You'll be looking for a stolen body, living in an empty tomb, and missing the resurrection.

When we proclaim resurrection, part of what we are saying is that Jesus is not just a good man who died two thousand years ago and whose good teachings are recorded in the very old and hard to understand book we call the Bible. When we say Christ is risen, we are saying that he is alive and is here with us. The power of death and darkness has been broken. And because he is alive, we can meet him here, not just in the church, but in our daily living. And, we are saying something else: whatever darkness or pain or suffering is in your life, Jesus has been there before you. He is with you. He knows your name.

When you are sick and when you are grieving, Jesus knows your name.  
When you are worried and when you feel hopeless, Jesus knows your name.  
And when your fears threaten to overwhelm you, Jesus knows your name.  
And when you are coping with guilt and failure, Jesus knows your name.  
And when you face situations you could not have imagined in your worst nightmares,  
Jesus knows your name.

Mary. It's me, Jesus. I am alive, and I am with you.

Because he is alive, we can let go of the empty tombs where we sometimes would like to keep Jesus, but where he refuses to stay.

If you think the Christian faith is only about what we believe, not about how we live, then I say to you, that tomb is empty.

And if you think the Christian faith is only about the privileges and benefits of being God's children rather than the responsibilities, then I say to you, that tomb is empty.

And if you think you can be a Christian on your own, without being committed and involved in a Christian community, then I say to you, that tomb is empty.

And if you are looking for Jesus in any of those tombs, don't be surprised if you can't find him there. He's out in front of us, calling us by name, challenging us with new life.

He's out there with us, reminding us there is no loss, no human misery or disaster that God cannot transform, remake, and redeem by the power of God's love.

So if you've been wounded in the church, if you've turned your back on the church, even if you've turned away from God, the message of Easter is that you have never been outside the circle of God's love.

If you have been living with tragedy and suffering and grief, the message of Easter is that Jesus the Christ is your strength and your shield and the power to begin anew.

In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Seen with eyes of faith, it is the sacrament in which the living Christ is present, strengthening us for our new life in him. So if you, like Mary, find yourself standing at the tomb, weeping for what is missing from your life, and wondering who has robbed you, then know that the risen Christ is here and he is alive. You can meet him in this place and around this table. He not only knows your name, he knows your need. He stands at the door of your heart, knocking.

Happy Easter, brothers and sisters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.