

Which Disciple are You?

John 20:18,

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

"Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed" (John 20:8)!

My brothers and sisters, it is among the most ancient of Christian liturgies. First, I say: "He is risen!" And then you say, "He is risen indeed!" May we try this a couple of times this morning? --- By the Spirit's power you and I have been gathered together to celebrate our Lord's resurrection at just the "proper place"! And by the "proper place," I do not simply mean at 1541 Lake Murray Boulevard, in Irmo--but more importantly--we have been gathered together in "Joseph's Lovely Garden;" in "Joseph of Arimathea's Lovely Garden" that is, together with Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John! As an aside, let me share with you that Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four Gospel accounts:

- St Matthew describes him simply as a "rich man and a disciple of Jesus" (Mt. 27:57)!
- St Mark tells us he was "a respected member of the Jerusalem Council who was himself looking for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43).
- And St. Luke tells us: "He had not consented to the decision of the Jewish authorities to crucify Jesus" (Luke 23:50-56).
- But most importantly, St John tells us that when Joseph of Arimathea had heard of Jesus' death, this "secret" disciple of Jesus "asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission" (John 19:38).

Immediately, Joseph of Arimathea purchased a linen shroud (Mark 15:46) and proceeded to Golgotha. There, Joseph of Arimathea and John took the body of Jesus down from the cross and bound it in linen cloths with spices that Nicodemus had bought.

These three courageous disciples next transported the prepared corpse to a man-made cave, hewn from a gigantic rock, in a Garden of Joseph's own house, which Joseph of Arimathea had intended one day to become his own tomb (Matthew 27:60)!

When we remember that Jesus was crucified between two convicted criminals and yet buried in a rich man's tomb, we can't help but recall the ancient prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 which we read here on Good Friday: "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death; although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth!"

It's in Joseph's lovely garden, where we first meet Mary Magdalene! And who was she? From the New Testament, we can conclude that Mary's home town was a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. And St Luke tells us--and that she was a leading figure among several women whom Jesus had also called to be his disciples.

It was out of her, that Jesus had initially cast "seven demons" (Luke 8:1-3).

Although we don't know what kind of demons they were, there has always been a certain segment of people alive in the church who suggest that she must have been a prostitute in her former life--although there is no Biblical evidence to support this claim! Certainly, this was the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the controversial rock opera that first appeared on Broadway in 1971, with the music written by Andrew Lloyd Weber and the lyrics to the songs written by Tim Rice. They pictured Mary Magdalene this way and capture what they believe would have been her exact sentiments in that song: "I don't know how to love him!"

If Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute in her previous life, why her experience in the company of Jesus would have no doubt been so radically different than what her experience had been with so many other men.

They approached her because of what they were hoping to receive from her, but Jesus approached her because of what he had come to bring to her--the more abundant life, the forgiveness of all her sins, the gift of God's love for her and eternal life!

Certainly, Mary Magdalene did her best to love Jesus by her fearless devotion to him. When the men among Jesus' disciples abandoned Jesus at the hour of mortal danger, Mary Magdalene was one of those women who stayed close to him; even to the bitter end of his crucifixion.

- She was among the first women disciples at Jesus' tomb and;
- The first person to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection;
- Even as she also became the first disciple to "preach" the good news to others.

When Mary Magdalene arrived in Joseph's lovely garden that first Easter morning she was horrified to discover that the large stone (that was meant to serve as a proper barrier to Jesus' supposedly "final" resting place) had been removed from its entryway!

Initially she runs away from the tomb, and soon meets up with Peter and "that other disciple;" "the disciple whom Jesus loved!" Mary tells Peter and John what she has discovered--and it was certainly bad news in her initial estimation!

Because the grave stone had been rolled away, this could only mean one thing in Mary's mind: The grave robbers had been there and done their grizzly work.

From John's Gospel--it seems that Jesus' first disciples were trying their best to make sense out of something that just didn't make any sense and therefore were all running in succession, one after another, like members of the same team in a relay race at a track meet!

Therefore, Mary Magdalene passes the baton to Peter and the beloved disciple, so that they then pick up the race, running into the direction from which Mary had just come, back into the direction of the empty tomb.

I am hoping we might spend a few moments looking at how each of these three disciples experience Jesus' resurrection for themselves--and what we can learn from them about the joy of Easter!

I. THE FIRST DISCIPLE IS PETER--LET'S CALL HIM THE "DETECTIVE" DISCIPLE.

The first thing we discover about Peter--is that he was not nearly so "fleet of foot" as was John, who has always been presumed to be a younger disciple than Simon Peter. John arrives at the empty tomb first, but he does not go charging into it full force. No, somewhat guarded, he seems to be standing outside of the tomb, while looking into it.

Mysteriously enough, he sees the linen clothes that he and Joseph of Arimathea had used in wrapping up Jesus, along with those spices, very late Friday afternoon.

But when Peter does arrive there, he simply goes charging into the empty tomb--and as a good detective discovers 2 things:

(1) He discovers that the dead body of Jesus is missing. And (2) secondly he discovers that the linen shroud that had been wrapped around Jesus body...was now folded up all neat and tidy; like room service had been there in a way; and the "napkin" as some translations put it--that had been around Jesus' head was folded up nice and neatly too, but sitting in a different place, a few feet away!

Like Mary, he knows of only one conceptual possibility, which she expressed by saying: "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have lain him" (John 20:2)!

Peter was the detective disciple! In a world of rationality, of cause and effect, with the laws of motions and mechanics soundly in place, Peter surmised full well that dead bodies do not simply disappear. Somebody must have moved them! So, Peter leaves the empty tomb, still unaware of the Lord's resurrection!

II. MARY THE DISCIPLE OF HOPE

But friends, if Peter is the detective disciples--I still can't help but believe that Mary Magdalene, despite her apparent despair--may not have also been the disciple of hope? Why? Because a little later that morning--she returns there--to Joseph's Lovely Garden--for a second time!

Whatever those seven demons were that Jesus had cast out of her, there was no mistaking the fact that Jesus had given her a proper sense of hope and purpose and place in this world.

And here Mary had come, like the other women, to HOPEFULLY do for him--the ONLY LAST THING THEY AND SHE THOUGHT THAT THEY COULD POSSIBLY DO FOR HIM--BUT SOMEONE HAS APPEARENTLY ROBBED HER OF THAT OPPORTUNITY!

THEN JESUS IS PRESENT, UNFORTUNATELY, HOWEVER MARY SUPPOSSES HIM TO BE THE GARDNER. Like other of Jesus disciples, on that day and the days that follow--she doesn't recognize him at first!

Mary's world looked blurry through her big wet tears and she certainly did not recognize Jesus at first! Instead, she presumes him to be the gardener!

And it is not until Jesus calls Mary by name: "Mary!" that she is able to see him for who he is, turns around and runs towards him -- when she then commences to grab a hold on him as tightly as she can!

III. THE THIRD DISCIPLE THERE THAT DAY--WAS JOHN--LET'S CALL HIM THE DISCIPLE OF TRUST. Not only is he faster than Peter, he is the first disciple to actually look inside of the empty tomb. Mary is the first to see that the stone is rolled away! Peter is the first to bodily walk inside of that empty tomb, but John is the first of Jesus' disciples, it seems, to actually get down on his hands and knees to take a look inside--but then secondly, to actually enter into the empty tomb himself!

Here, John is writing about himself, when he says: "Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, ALSO WENT IN, AND HE SAW AND BELIEVED!"

What did he believe? If we were reading this Gospel lesson this morning in total isolation from the rest of John's Gospel we could falsely assume that the only thing John believed is that the tomb was empty and that the body of Jesus was missing. But we can never draw this conclusion when we remember how many times John speaks about the power of "believing" all throughout his Gospel.

In chapter 1, "He came unto his own...received him not, but to all who did receive him, who believed on his name.

In chapter 2, Jesus changes water into wine. John says: "He manifested his glory and his disciples believed on him.

In chapter 3: "Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life!"

In chapter 5: "The one who believes on him has passed out of judgment into life!"

In chapter 6, the Bread of Life discourse: "Do not just labor for the food that perishes but for the food that endures to eternal life!" What is the work that God requires? This is the work that God requires, that you believe on the One whom he has sent!

In chapter 7, "Whoever believes in me, out of him shall flow streams of living water, the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 11, "I am the Resurrection and the Life and the one who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live ... and the one who lives and believes in me shall never die!"

In chapter 14: "Let not your hearts be troubled, you that believe in God, believe also in me..."

In chapter 20: "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God and that by believing you might have life in his name!"

These three disciples of Jesus each came to recognize the resurrection of their Savior in different ways!

(1) Peter the detective, leaves the tomb initially that first Easter morning without knowing and has to rely, secondarily, for Mary to bring him the good news a little later--but may have remained even in his disbelief awhile longer until the Risen Christ appeared to the men folk later that first Easter evening in that Upper Room in Jerusalem as we will hear about next week!

(2) Mary sees the empty tomb and even has a conversation with Jesus before she recognizes him when he calls her by name. Later, Thomas won't believe what the others say until he finally sees the punctured wounds in Jesus' hands and feet for himself! But seeing them, there is no indication that he actually had to literally put his hands into the hands of Jesus as he said he would before he would believe! He cries out immediately to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!"

(3) John sees and believes. Mary Magdalene is the first of Jesus' disciples to preach the good news to others--but here John--who always seems to write about his own involvement with Jesus and his ministry in a rather --- modest fashion --- simply tells us, with respect to himself: "He saw and believed" (John 20:8)!

Whether you are like Peter the detective, not sure of the evidence and perhaps a little skeptical, and you've come this morning because somebody else, somebody you love like Mary, has told you the good news of the resurrection and brought you to the garden.

Or you are like Mary and you have come because you know what it is like to weep over someone you love, and you know what it is like for Jesus to call you by name, to put his arms around you and hold you close in the joy of eternal life.

Or you are like the disciple whom Jesus loved, and you've been on a journey of discipleship for a long time, so long that you have developed faith and trust in the one called the Christ, and a quick glance in the empty garden tomb confirms what you know to be true.

The good news is that the risen Christ came to all of them and will come to all of us – one way or another.

James Moore tells a humorous story about a woman named Carol who was the organist at her church. She was an outstanding musician, but she did something no organist should ever do. She overslept on Easter morning and missed the sunrise service.

Obviously, she was embarrassed. Of course, the minister and the church forgave her. They teased her about it a little, but it was done lovingly and in good fun. However, the next Easter her phone rang at 5:00 in the morning.

Jolted awake by the loud ringing, she scrambled to answer it. It was the minister, and he said, "Carol, it's Easter morning! The Lord is risen! And I suggest you do the same!"

I'm glad that none of you overslept this Easter morning. I'm glad that you are here to celebrate the most important day in the Christian year--the day the followers of Jesus went to his tomb early in the morning and found it empty, for he had risen from the dead.

Even though he had told them that he would be crucified, dead and buried and then, on the third day, would be resurrected, it took a while for this unimaginable event to become real to them. This was something way out of their experience. The dead simply do not rise from the grave. They scarcely could believe it. It was simply too good to be true. But it was true . . . and that is why we are here today. Jesus Christ has risen from the grave.

Still there are those people who ask, "Even if it is true, does it make any difference whether or not Jesus was raised from the dead? Does it really matter? It certainly does matter: If you have ever truly loved

somebody and lost them to death. It also matters if you value the gift of life. Life is so precious. No person who is healthy physically and emotionally is eager to die! Life is simply too wonderful to welcome death as a friend.

Actor Jack Nicholson was once interviewed by Parade magazine in anticipation of the release of his popular film, "The Bucket List." In keeping with the theme of that movie, Nicholson reflected on how his understanding of life had changed over the years. At one point in the interview, Nicholson said, "We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side. That's why we fear death!"

And yet you and I would certainly have to differ with Mr. Nicholson on this point, wouldn't we? As the followers of Christ, we do believe we do know what is on the other side of that wall! We don't so much fear death as much as we resist letting go of life.

That is the way God created us to be. Life is so beautiful, so rich, so wonderful. We know that beyond this world is another world and we trust God that it will be an even better world than this one, but we were created out of the dust of this world. It has been our home, and we love it as God created us to love it. Only a deeply troubled person wants to die. We all want to live. Still death is one reality in life that confronts us all.

If Christ lives, then life has meaning. There is hope even in the most difficult circumstances. Even when we are at the end of our ropes, here is a knot we can hang on to. If Christ defeated death, if my life goes on forever, if the gospel is true, I can live courageously, victoriously. God's Spirit can overcome my fears by his grace and I can be all he intends for me to be. I need never countenance the possibility of absolute futility and failure--not if Christ has been raised from the grave. It is that knowledge that has given followers of Jesus Christ power over their circumstances in every era for more than two thousand years.

"Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone! Because he lives, I know who holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives!"

God's Spirit who longs to firm up our faith in the resurrection of his Son is why we are here today! We need to be reminded of the power of life over death, of hope over despair, of love over hate, and there is only one place on earth that can be found. That is by peering into the empty tomb Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord!
Amen