**The Resurrection of Our Lord**

**Sunday April 12, 2020**

**“Running to the Tomb” (John 20:1-18)**

Imagine what it must have been like for the friends and followers of Jesus during those days after Good Friday. Their dear friend and teacher had been brutally executed. Their hopes and dreams were crushed. The great mission that they were a part of was abruptly ended. They must have wondered how they could possibly go on after his death. Some of them had spent three years of their lives with him. They must have wondered, “What are we going to do now?”

Jesus was gone. He was dead. His body was wrapped up in a burial shroud and laid in a tomb. And all the wonderful things that he said and did seemed to die with him. For those of us who have lost a loved one, we know the feelings of desolation, loneliness, and despair as a big hole is left in our lives. In times of grief and loss an overwhelming darkness encircles us and we long for the dawn to break. I’m pretty sure that Jesus’ friends experienced a similar darkness in their lives.

This Easter, we’re facing real challenges in our country and in our world. COVID-19 continues to bring darkness to our world as the numbers of deaths increases. While there is hope in the number of people recovering from the virus, I hear the current numbers and the projected numbers of deaths and I feel weighed down. I worry about the many elderly people in our congregation and my mother-in-law because they are the most vulnerable. I’m concerned for those who continue to go out into the world as essential workers and risk contracting the virus. I’m especially concerned about those in our congregation who work in health care, on the front lines of this pandemic.

During this time, I feel like a fish out of water. The normal routine of my life has been disrupted and the weekly pattern of my pastoral ministry has been dramatically changed. I’ve had to learn a different way of being a minister and it’s been a real learning curve. The joy of gathering together for worship, Bible studies, and prayer is temporarily gone. This is most evident this weekend. Good Friday and Easter are the most significant days in the church year and instead of gathering together for worship, we are huddled around our computers. In a way, we’re a bit like those friends of Jesus, who were cloistered behind closed doors (John 20:19).

Added to this is the uncertainty that we all feel about life. When will this all end? What about school, work, or summer plans? What’s the long-term impact of all this? It’s very natural for people to be fearful and anxious at times like these. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed by the darkness of these days.

John’s story of Jesus’ resurrection begins in *darkness.* Mary Magdalene, a follower of Jesus, went to the garden tomb in the early hours of that first Easter morning, “*while it was still dark*” (John 20:1). His reference to *darkness* takes on a symbolic meaning here, as this chapter depicts how Jesus’ disciples make the journey from darkness to light through their encounters with the risen Christ. Mary was still mourning Jesus’ death and when she saw that the stone over the tomb’s entrance had been rolled away, she concluded that it was a case of *grave robbery* and *not resurrection*. She immediately *ran* to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the Lord’s body was missing. “*They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb,”* she declared, *“and we don’t know where they have put him*” (John 20:2).

Upon hearing her report, Peter and the Beloved Disciple *ran* to the tomb to see for themselves (John 20:3-4). They ran neck and neck until the Beloved Disciple pulled ahead and got to the tomb first. While there are many interesting and fanciful interpretations of the results of this foot race, the best one is that the Beloved Disciple’s *love* for Jesus propelled him to the tomb. The Beloved Disciple is the exemplary disciple in the Gospel; thus, he embodies a love and intimacy with Jesus that is characteristic of true discipleship.

When he arrived, the Beloved Disciple did not enter the tomb right away; he merely peered in and saw the grave clothes lying on the burial platform (John 20:5). Peter, on the other hand, immediately burst into the tomb and observed the linen grave clothes and the cloth that covered Jesus’ head neatly folded and placed separately from rest (John 20:6-7). Here the Gospel writer provides us with clear evidence for the resurrection. Not only was the tomb *empty,* but the burial clothing, *lying neatly folded on* *the platform*, ruled out any possibility of grave robbery. Grave robbers would not have taken the time to unwrap Jesus’ body and carefully fold up his grave clothes.

When the Beloved Disciple observed this evidence, he came to the proper conclusion – Jesus had risen from the dead. The Beloved Disciple was the first to follow the breadcrumb trail from darkness to light, from despair to belief. Shortly after Peter entered the tomb and looked around, the Beloved Disciple went in. Like Peter, he observed the empty tomb and the abandoned grave clothes, but he took it a step further, mere observation led to faith – “*he saw and believed*” (John 20:8). He embraced a resurrection faith based on the empty tomb alone, without the benefit of seeing the risen Christ or knowing the Old Testament Scriptures about the Lord’s resurrection (John 20:9). In this way, the Beloved Disciple serves an example for all subsequent believers who have not seen the risen Christ yet believe in the resurrection based on the evidence alone.

After the departure of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene re-enters the story. Like the Beloved Disciple, she too makes the journey from darkness to light; she just needed a few more steps to get there. Returning to the tomb, she stood at the entrance and wept. Her grief and dismay over the death of Jesus is intensified by the absence of his body for in that culture the desecration of a grave was a terrible and shocking thing. Stooping down, she looked into the tomb and saw two angels dressed in white and sitting where Jesus once was (John 20:12). Their position on the burial platform, one at the head and one at the foot, signifies that *God*, *not grave robbers*, had removed Jesus’ body. When the angels asked her why she was crying, Mary’s response signalled that she still did not understand that it was God who emptied the tomb: “*They have taken my Lord away and I don’t know where they have put him*” (John 20:13). After saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t recognize him (John 20:14).

What is striking is that Mary saw so much and realized so little. She saw the two angels in white and she even saw Jesus himself but assumed that he was the gardener. The light was breaking in all around her, but her grief and despair allowed her only to see darkness and to think in terms of death. But our compassionate Lord gently guided Mary from darkness to light. He didn’t blind her with the light, but engaged in a friendly Q & A with her, like he did with the Emmaus Road disciples (Luke 24:13-35). By doing so, he allowed Mary to express her grief and dismay. Finally, the lights came on for Mary and she realized that it was Jesus standing before her. It happened when Jesus spoke her name, when the radically new presence of the risen Christ connected with the memory and intimacy of her relationship with Jesus (John 20:16). The truth of the resurrection connected with her in a personal way. Sometimes, that’s what it takes for people to come to faith.

The enduring lesson of John chapter 20 is nicely summarized in the words of my friend Kevin Quast:

“History and faith come together in John’s account of the resurrection appearances. John verifies the evidence of the empty tomb and the abandoned grave clothes with the witness of Mary Magdalene and Peter. Then John proceeds with a series of distinctive vignettes in which *Jesus encounters individuals, meeting them at their level of insight and need, so that each may respond in faith*.

The Beloved Disciple ‘meets’ Jesus in the empty tomb; Mary meets Jesus in her mourning; other disciples meet Jesus in their fear; and Thomas meets him in his doubt” (*Reading the Gospel of John,* p. 129).

People make their journey to Jesus in different ways. People have diverse questions, hurts, and fears. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism and discipleship. Jesus meets people “at their level of insight and need, so that each many respond in faith.” Not everyone follows the path of the Beloved Disciple who believed almost intuitively. Some people, like Mary, need the gospel to impact them on a personal level. Finally, some, like Thomas, kick and scream until the evidence is so conclusive that there is no other choice but to believe. Wherever you are this morning in your journey with God, the risen Christ meets you where you are and calls you by name.

My hope and prayer for each one of you is that the light of the risen Christ would shine into your lives. The darkness that we are enduring right now seems to be never-ending. It’s hard to hope when there is so much suffering all around. We can’t even gather together on Easter morning to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. But take heart, brothers and sisters, our Easter proclamation is not silenced, our resurrection joy is not subdued. The church does its best work standing amidst the darkness and proclaiming life over death. This Easter, amidst these difficult days, the message of Christ’s resurrection has life-giving power for a weary world.