

Running Toward the Resurrection

John 20:1-10

Easter Day

Outdoor Worship Service

Austin Heights Baptist Church

Have you ever noticed how much running is going on in the resurrection story? It starts in the dark and seems to keep on most of the morning. I always tended to think that the first response to the resurrection was shock or joy or speechless amazement. Mark says the first responses were trauma and ecstasy. But John tells us it was running, and a lot of it.

Mary Magdalene is the first to go to the tomb. In the darkness, before sunrise there she is trudging to the tomb. She gets there and sees that the stone had been rolled away, so John says she ran all the way back to tell Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, most likely young John himself (20:2). Mary does not yet understand what's going on. All she knows is that the stone has been removed so she runs back to the other disciples saying that someone has removed the body of their Lord. Put ourselves in Peter and young John's shoes. They're sitting there in the dark still traumatized over Jesus's brutal death, and then they hear someone running toward them before they see who it is. Is it a messenger of more doom? Are soldiers coming? They likely jump up and brace themselves.

Then Mary runs up and give them the startling news. She is barely able to get the words out of her breathless mouth before they take off. Peter and John are running back to the tomb themselves. At first, they are running to see what's going on? What happened? Running in trauma, just putting one foot in front of the other

as fast as they can, but after a while, something imperceptible happens. They start running against one another. They race. For one reason or another compete. Starting out their faces are toward the tomb and they run headlong. But somewhere along the way, Peter turns and looks at young John and sees the brash teenager outrunning him. Peter's thinking, "I'm the leader and he's not going to beat me!" At the same time, John, younger and fleet of foot, turns and sees Peter pulling ahead of him. "What?! I'm not going to let that old guy outrun me!" So, John puts on the speed.

All of this running sounds pretty ludicrous to me. Why is everyone running? The sun is not even up, and it sounds like a track meet – labored breathing, fast footsteps, shouting, more fast footsteps and grunts and breathing. Why?

Most likely, Mary, Peter, and John would tell us that with all of the shock and joy, fear and excitement, confusion and questions they just broke into a run.

When I was a little boy, I had a dog named Sam who hated the clap of thunder. If it thundered Sam would start running. It didn't matter where, just run. He'd run in circles in the backyard. He'd run and hide – for a second – then out he would dash and run somewhere else. Behind the tree, around the tree, over to the next tree, then a big circle, and on and on until Sam got too tired, or the thunder passed.

Whatever the empty tomb meant, it surely meant that they could not sit still, so they ran. They just ran.

Personally, I've long thought it odd that Peter and the beloved disciple run against each other. They're competing. And as odd as it might sound, is very likely exactly what is happening. Peter and the beloved disciple, most likely young John, were rivals.

New Testament scholars read some of the rivalry in the early church back into the text because in the era after the close of the New Testament, it is likely that the traditions and communities founded by Peter were rivals with those of John. Would a Petrine or a Johannine interpretation of the church prevail?

All through John's Gospel, Peter – who is the natural leader of the disciples, and John – who seems to be most beloved by Jesus himself, find themselves, even against their better instincts vying for centerstage. So, when they hear Mary's news of the empty tomb, and start running, they're running because of the shock and confusion and run to see what's going on. But as they run, the old habits come to fore, and soon they are running against each other.

But I wonder if there is more going on with all this running. It is true that they were running because of excitement and confusion. And I don't doubt that rivalry played a part. But the writer of John sees something more going on. Something much more profound. John the Gospel writer knows there is more going on here than running toward an empty grave. These disciples do not know it yet, they certainly do not yet understand all that it means – and indeed, it will take them, and us, more than our lifetimes to live into all that it means – but these disciples are running toward the future, toward the resurrection, toward a radical new way of life, the new creation.

New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “When they started running, they were pupils of a dead teacher; by the time their running is done, they will be disciples of a risen and living Christ” (Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, p. 83).

Long says that when John reports that the beloved disciple “outran Peter and reached the tomb first,” (John 20:4), he is not simply reporting the results of the race, he is making a theological statement. John wants to say that the beloved disciple is the first person to arrive at *Easter*, the first person to believe in the good news of the resurrection, the first child of the kingdom to wake up and see the dawn of the new creation.

So here is our question: Why is it important to know who won the race? Why is it important to know that the beloved disciple was there first? John is showing us that the beloved disciple was running full-speed and took a flying leap across chasm between the old and dying age and the new age in the resurrection. The beloved disciple is not simply the fastest runner, he is the first to believe, and the way of his believing is very important. His way of believing is essential to John.

John shows us multiple disciples coming to believe – but not like the beloved disciple. Mary believes when the Living Christ calls her by name, and she sees him. The other disciples – except Thomas – will believe when Jesus appears to them saying, “Peace be with you.” And old hard-headed Thomas will come to belief when the risen Christ comes to him and offers to let him touch his wounds.

But the beloved disciple is different. He believes when he sees ... nothing. He does not see Jesus; he does not touch Jesus; he does not hear Jesus call his name. He just looks into the empty tomb and believes. In other words, the beloved disciple, unlike the others, believes in the resurrection in light of Jesus' *absence*. He has no evidence; he only has the emptiness. He has no proofs, no photographs, no blinding lights, no scorched clothing or places on earth caused by a burst of resurrection energy. He doesn't even understand the Bible on all this. All he has is an empty place where the body of the one who loved him used to be. But John says, it is enough: "He saw and believed" (John 20:8).

Perhaps now we can begin to understand why, from John's perspective, it was so important to record who won the footrace to the tomb. John wants us to know that the very first believer in the resurrection, the forerunner of all Easter faith, came to belief in precisely the same way that you and I do – *not* seeing the risen Christ. The risen Jesus has not appeared to us in a garden and called our name. The risen Jesus has not found us and stretched out his wounded hands for us to touch. The Easter faith is not only "He is risen!" but also "He is not here." The resurrection of Christ means the absence of Jesus of Nazareth, and the beloved disciple was the first to know that, and the first to believe.

"Blessed are those who have not seen," Jesus said, "and yet have come to believe." By this, he means us. The beloved disciple who did not see yet believed, is our forerunner.

The beloved disciples believed in the resurrection when he saw the empty tomb not because he had some deep mystical insight but because he knew and trusted Jesus.

When our youngest daughter, Callie, was a baby and a toddler, she had the most difficult time whenever Jane left her presence. Eventually, she got to where it was okay if Jane was in the house but if Jane went to the grocery store or ran to pick up Emily from school, Callie would stand in the window and cry and cry. I tried all kinds of things: getting out different toys, putting on a favorite movie on the VHS player, playing games, dancing and even singing a song I learned from Jane that went “My mommy comes back, my mommy comes back, she always comes back to get me...” I sang it over and over and oftentimes, Callie would end up singing along with me through her tears. Of course, the key is that her mommy always came back. Jane always returned.

Over time, Callie learned that Jane always came back. Callie’s trust moved from an external reality to an inner trust. She knew that she could trust Jane to do what she said she would do. Jane was not abandoning her, and she eventually learned that Jane’s love was expressed in a variety of ways like going to buy groceries.

Likewise, the beloved disciple was very close to Jesus. He had followed Jesus along with his brother and friends Simon Peter and Andrew. He walked with Jesus, listened to Jesus, watched Jesus, ate with Jesus, prayed with Jesus, and grew about as close to Jesus as you could. He knew Jesus so well, that when Jesus promised his resurrection after his death, the beloved disciple knew Jesus was going to do what he said. He had an inner trust so that instead of feeling abandoned, he bet his life on the wager that Christ Jesus was resurrected – a different, even higher expression of love.

In John Updike's novel, *A Month of Sundays*, there is a story, a parable about the Christian life being "an improbable wager on an impossible possibility" as one theologian commented.

A group of men are playing poker. The cards are dealt, with some cards facing up and others face down. The main character, Thomas, has been dealt a very strong hand, so he decides to bet heavily. As he raises the stakes, the other players drop out one by one, except one guy named Fred.

But based upon the cards showing, Fred has a pretty poor hand. Updike calls them "nondescript garbage." Nevertheless, Fred keeps betting, calling and raising Thomas at every opportunity. Thomas can't figure this out. You can look and see the face cards that Thomas has a strong hand while Fred has a losing hand. Thomas has one weak card that no one else knows about, but it is still virtually unbeatable.

When the cards are all put on the table, everyone is shocked to discover that Fred has the winning hand. Thomas realizes there was only one card in the entire deck that could have beaten him, and Fred had that one card. And if Thomas had held any other card whatsoever than his one weak card, he would have won and won big. In other words, Fred was betting everything – everything – on the tiny chance that Thomas had the one losing card and he held the one winning card.

Thomas thought to himself:

Fred had stayed, then, against me when only one card in the deck ... could have made my hand a loser to his. Two truths dawned upon me:

He was crazy.

He had won.

*He had raised not on a reasonable faith but on a virtual impossibility; and he had been right. “Y-y-y-you didn’t feel to me like you had it,” he told me, raking it in (John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, pp. 197-198).*

The beloved disciple ran to the tomb and found it empty. Nothing else there. Vacant. A very poor hand, to be sure. And the world has much stronger cards showing. But the beloved disciple wagers everything anyway. He bets his life on a virtual impossibility, that Jesus’s absence was a sign of a new and inexplicable presence. Jesus had been raised from the dead. Like the cardplayer Fred, we now know two truths about the beloved disciple: He is crazy – a fool for Christ – and he has won. Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead.

And so, we believe today. Not because of proofs or evidence, but because the beloved disciple knew Jesus and trusted Jesus. And so do we. The beloved disciple told the story of the empty tomb and the risen Christ to others, and they believed it, as well. Then they told the story to still others, and those others passed this great wonder along, down a great chain of believing all the way to us. And we wager everything.

This is risky, crazy stuff we do and believe. It’s the foolishness of the gospel, says the Apostle Paul. But we do it and believe it because the beloved disciple, probably teenager John, running to the tomb, became the forerunner of all Easter faith, believed and passed the word along the way into the present. Prompting frail folk like us to testify with others across the centuries the words of the Apostles’ Creed:

We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord;

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended into hell, - and dare we believe it? Dare we wage everything on it? –

He rose again on the third day.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.