

As I noted last Sunday, we Christians sometimes tend to jump from Palm Sunday with its shouts of “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” to this morning with shouts of “He is Risen, He is Risen Indeed” and overlook what happened during Holy Week. We really don’t like to think about all Jesus had to endure for our sake. For that very reason over the last six weeks we have been studying the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life from the Last Supper to the Crucifixion. During Lent, we have broken bread with Jesus at the Last Supper; we have prayed with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane; we have witnessed the betrayal, denial and desertion of His disciples; we have stood by as He was arrested and tried; we were horrified by His torture and humiliation at the hands of the Romans soldiers; and finally, we suffered through His death on the cross for our sins. Thus, having now gone through this lonely valley with Him, we can now shout “He is Risen, He is Risen indeed!”

As Christians, the Resurrection is at the heart of our faith. It is so important that it is recorded in all four gospels. This morning let’s see how the Gospel of John records it in the first eighteen verses of Chapter 20.

Read John 20:1-18

A Sunday School teacher was teaching her kindergarten class about the Creation story. After several weeks, they were ready for a review. “What did God make on the first day?” she asked. “On the second day?” They answered both questions correctly. “And what happened on the third day?” she asked. One little child, face shining with enthusiasm shouted: “He rose from the dead!” When you think about it, in accordance with God’s plan for salvation that was the correct answer.

When the women rose early on that first Easter morning, they were focused on the task at hand; completing the final burial preparations for the body of Jesus. Friday had been a living nightmare. They could not believe that their friend and teacher Jesus had been arrested, put on trial before Pontius Pilate, humiliated and beaten by the Roman soldiers, and crucified. Then since Jesus died just before the beginning of their Sabbath when no work was allowed, Nicodemus and Joseph had to rush to bury Him in a nearby garden tomb, and were unable to complete all the necessary preparations for burial.

For Jesus’ followers, their Sabbath, our Saturday, had been the most depressing experience ever. Instead of the normal joys of worship, there was only doubt over what was going to happen next, fear that the Romans might also arrest them, and grief over the loss of their beloved Teacher. Sleep had been restless and Sunday morning brought a reminder of the task that lay ahead of them. A task that made them revisit their grief, still fresh from Friday, as they returned to the garden tomb.

In the Gospel of Mark, we are told that several women went with Mary Magdalene to the tomb; however, in their grief, no one had thought to ask some of the men to accompany them to roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. The stone was large enough to cover the entrance and to prevent animals and grave robbers from gaining access. It would take a concerted effort to remove it so that these faithful women could carry out the final preparations for burial. However, to their surprise, when they arrived at the tomb the stone had already been rolled away. But the body was nowhere to be found, it was gone; how was that possible?

The women did not understand what had happened; their first thought was that someone had taken the body. In our text this morning, Mary Magdalene ran back to tell Peter and John that the tomb was empty and that someone had taken Jesus' body. Peter and John ran back to the tomb, but John was faster and got there first. But he did not go in; he only stood at the entrance and looked in. However, Peter in his usual head-strong manner did not hesitate and went right into the empty tomb. John could out-run Peter, but Peter could out-dare John. They saw the burial clothes neatly folded, no longer needed. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Peter saw and wondered. Our text says that John saw and believed. Then after seeing the empty tomb, Peter and John just went back to their homes.

Have you ever wondered where the disciples were on Easter morning; why they didn't accompany the women to the tomb? Were they sleeping like a lot of people do on Sunday morning? Did they not believe Jesus when He told them that He would rise from the grave on the third day? He had told them over and over again that this would happen, but it appears that it didn't sink in!

However, it appears that the religious leaders had taken more faith in the words of Jesus than the disciples. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told that the religious leaders went to Pontius Pilate and asked that he station guards at the tomb and seal it so that no one could come and take the body. Because of a lack of faith, the disciples did not rush to the tomb on Easter morning in anticipation that it would be empty. Even when they later examined the empty tomb, their initial conclusion was that grave robbers had taken the body, and not of the power of God and Jesus' words. Do we lack faith or do we believe with all our heart that Jesus is risen and that the tomb was empty?

After Mary Magdalene had discovered the empty tomb and told the disciples, she remained in the garden, consumed by her grief. Our text says: "As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb." As she stared into the empty tomb, she must have been thinking not only has my Lord been killed, but now someone has stolen His body. When we are searching for something that we have lost, we tend to look again and again in the place where we last saw it, expecting to find it there. When Jesus appeared to her, Mary Magdalene did not initially recognize Jesus

because she insisted on facing the wrong direction. She could not take her eyes off the empty tomb and initially had her back to Jesus.

When sorrow comes, we must never let tears blind our eyes to the presence of God; and we must never fasten our eyes upon the grave and forget the heavens. Alan Walker in his book *Everybody's Calvary* tells of officiating at a funeral where the service was just a formality and the people were not Christians. When the grave side service was over, a young woman looked into the grave and sadly said: "Goodbye, father." For those who do not believe in Jesus Christ and the resurrection, it is a sad ending. But for those who believe, we walk away from the graveside saying: "So long, God be with you until we meet again." I know when I said goodbye to my brother Billy seven years ago; I touched his casket and said: "You go on now; I'll be coming along later." This is the hope and assurance that we have as Christians.

I am reminded of the funeral of Winston Churchill, the great Prime Minister of England. After the stately hymns and majestic service at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, after the benediction, Churchill had arranged before his death for a bugler high in the dome of St. Paul's on one side to play "Taps," the signal of the day's end; then after a pause, a bugler on the other side of the dome played "Reveille," the signal of a new day. Churchill's testimony was that at the end of history the last note will not be "Taps," but it will be "Reveille;" it will be a new beginning, a new day for all who believe.

Like us, Mary Magdalene may have been guilty of looking for life and happiness in the wrong places. It's like that old country song: "Looking for love in all the wrong place." Many of us think we can find happiness and peace of mind in our careers, in wealth, in positions of honor, in titles, and for some, unfortunately in addictions such as drugs and alcohol. But in the end, these are just fleeting moments of pleasure leaving us with an emptiness in both our heart and soul. Because we were created in the image of God, we can never be truly happy and at peace until we come back to God. And the road back to God goes through Calvary, and it is marked by the sign of the cross and is paved with the blood of Jesus Christ.

Mary also did not recognize Jesus immediately because she was not expecting to find Him alive. It is easy to miss the reality of the resurrection because we only see what we expect to see. Like the disciples and Mary, we try to limit God to the narrowness of our minds and the limits of our abilities, and we fail to realize that all things are possible for God. How much of not only Easter, but of life do we miss out on because we don't let God be God, and walk in faith, looking for the best in life? The backward gaze of the disciples and Mary had to be redirected to the future with all its hope and promises. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we all have the opportunity for a personal relationship with the Lord; a relationship rooted in love and faith. When Jesus called her name, Mary's grief was immediately transformed into joy.

In this story from the Apostle John, we have one of the greatest recognition scenes in all literature. What a beautiful scene it must have been. Mary is crying and she hears a man ask her why she is weeping. She thinks the man is the gardener and asks him if he knows where they have taken the body of Jesus. And then, she hears the sweetest, most precious sound in the world – the Master calls her name – “Mary.” She does not hesitate, but turns around and responds with “Teacher.” When Jesus first spoke, asking the reason for her tears, there is no sign of recognition. Only when He speaks her name does she experience His living presence.

The best thing that any of us can ever experience is to stand where Mary stood that morning and have Jesus, the Risen Lord, call our name. And believe me, He knows each one of our names because He died for each one of us out of love. But to really hear our name, we must turn to Him and face Him. And here’s the key point that I hope you don’t miss. Jesus is waiting for you to turn to Him so that He can call your name. But we must turn. He wants to call your name and give you the gifts of forgiveness of sin and eternal life. He has already paid the full price on the cross at Calvary over two thousand years ago.

In this story of Mary Magdalene there is the very essence of Christianity; for the Christian is essentially one who can say without any doubt as Mary did: “I have seen the Lord.” Christianity does not mean knowing about Jesus; it means knowing Him personally like a friend. It is the confidence and certainty of experiencing Jesus alive and in your heart each and every day.

On this day of celebration, the Risen Christ comes to open our eyes so that we can see and share in His risen life. Do you hear Jesus calling your name? Maybe you have never heard Him call your name before. Maybe it has been a long time since you have heard His voice or experienced His presence in your life. Whatever the case, on this Easter morning, He is calling each of our names. Don’t let another moment, hour, or day go by without turning and responding to His loving voice within you. Easter does not have to be limited to one day a year. It can be year round in your heart. You can experience the joy and peace of mind that only Jesus Christ can give if you will only answer His call. For He is risen; He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen