

OPENING SENTENCE:

The Lord is risen! Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord is risen indeed!

PRAYER OF ADORATION:

Glory to you, O God; you have won victory over death, raising Jesus from the grave and giving us eternal life. Glory to you, O Christ; for us and for our salvation you overcame death and opened the gate to everlasting life. Glory to you, O Holy Spirit; you lead us into the truth. Glory to you, O Blessed Trinity, now and forever. AMEN.

Sermon: Tomb Runner

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (Which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. This is the word of the Lord.

John's witness to what happened "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark" (v. 1) After the well-known footrace of Peter and the "other disciple" to the tomb upon hearing Mary Magdalene report that the body had been stolen from the tomb, John tells us what each experienced upon entering the tomb. Peter is described as having observed the linen graveclothes lying in one place and the "cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself" (vv. 6-7). In contrast, we are told not only that the other disciple went in and saw (presumably what Peter had also seen), but this other disciple "Believed" (v.8)

It is intriguing to ponder what it is to be made of Peter's viewing the linen wrappings in one place and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head "in a place by itself." The overarching force of mentioning the graveclothes is to emphasize that they were cast aside because Jesus did not and would not need them anymore.

By itself, the report about the other disciple leaves us scratching our heads. On the one hand, he observes the same scene and is reported to have “Believed”. The easy assumption, that he “believes” that Jesus is risen from the dead, is snatched away by the sentence that follows in 20:9; “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” If this disciple, along with Peter, has not yet understood about the resurrection, what then does he “Believe”? His single set of clues was the graveclothes, and especially the head cloth.

Thus the first, bold element of John’s Easter proclamation is not that Jesus is raised, but that he is ascended – or at least that he is in the process of ascending, living into and out of the very life of God. Indeed this becomes even plainer in the next scene (vv. 11-18), as Mary stands weeping outside the tomb. She responds in turn to the angels and to Jesus himself as they sequentially inquire about why she is weeping. To all she implores that they tell her where Jesu’ body has been taken, so that she may render it to proper care. As Jesus speaks her name, “Mary”, the sheep hear the shepherds voice and responds to him, “Rabbouni”! Then Jesus explicitly declares his new reality to her: “Do not hold on to me, because I have not ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (v17).

John’s Easter account begins with a lot of running. When Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty, she runs to tell Simon Peter and The Beloved Disciple. Her words, like the shot of the gun that begins a race, send the two disciples running to check it out for themselves, Mary ran back also.

When we look out at the congregation on Easter morning, not many will be breathless. Perhaps no one ran to get to church today – although some may race to get a seat because the church will be fuller than usual, and we don’t want to have to sit up front. Why did they come? Did they come to hear something new, or to hear the old, old story once again? Is it anything more than the force of an old habit at work?

Swiss theological expert, Karl Barth said that what brings people to worship – not just on Easter, but any day – is an unspoken question clinging to their hearts and minds, and that question is simply this:

“Is it true?” Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that God not only established a routine, that we call the laws of nature, but that one day God broke the routine and somehow raised Jesus from the dead? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened on that morning that we can only rebuild our lives on that foundation? Is it true?

These are such powerful questions – and they are unavoidable on a day such as this. Sometimes I am tempted to conclude that Easter is not a day for beginners. Rather, it can seem as if Easter is the advanced course for Christians, to be undertaken only after completing the introductory courses that deal with Jesus’ life and teachings. Begin with the Sermon on the Mount. Marvel at Jesus; wisdom. Learn from him. Become fascinated by his life, fixed on his person. If one begins there, perhaps then one will be better prepared to hear this mysterious tale about Jesus’ rising from the dead.

It can seem quite odd that people would flock to worship on Easter, of all days, a day on which we proclaim the very things that may be the hardest to believe.

However, it is clear from those who knew Jesus, from the apostles of the early church and from the authors of scripture, that Easter is not the dramatic conclusion to the story for those who are able to follow it that far. Rather, Easter is the beginning.

Read the first sermons that were ever preached in the early church as recorded in Acts. With what do they begin? They make no reference to Jesus’ teachings. His earthly life receives scant attention. It is almost as if the story of his life is of interest only if we see it from the vantage point of Easter. Even Jesus’ teachings are not even as important in their own right, because there is little that is original in them. Rather, they take on meaning only when we take into full account who the teacher is, that is, God’s chosen one who is to die and be raised again.

This is why the Gospels have been called Easter accounts with extended prologues. For the early followers of Jesus, the beginning point of Christian proclamation was the Easter event. Over and over the disciples started with proclamations about Easter, as if it were the only place to begin.

Through the centuries Christians have begun their journey of faith by running to the empty tomb. As modern people, who like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, we sometimes forget that the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be as difficult for these ancient people to believe as it is for us. These ancient people were not stupid. They had seen many people die and never once had they seen anyone come to life again. (Except for a few disciples)

Yes, there is something in the story to doubt. There is also another way to put it: there was something in the story that reached the deepest regions of their hearts and minds, where both doubt and faith are found. That is, in the resurrection God gave us such a miracle of Love and forgiveness that it is worthy of faith, and thus open to doubt. The very doubts we may hold attest to the scale and power of what we proclaim. So, the place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things we never doubt. Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us.

So, we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.

Easter may be just the place for beginners, after all. The place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things that are beyond the reach of our doubt. Rather, perhaps we need to begin where the early church began, with the larger realities and deeper mysteries that are open to doubt but are also large enough and deep enough to reveal something of God to us. That is the promise held out to us this day, the promise of Easter, which has throughout history been the occasion of the greatest doubt and also the source of the most profound faith. Perhaps we will find that the early church was right to begin right here, where the stakes are highest, risking doubt in order to claim a larger faith. Could it be that one of the reasons churches are filled on a day such as this is that we long to swim in the depths of realities that are large enough to reveal God to us, where both the risk and the promise are that much greater.

As a pastor, I hope that when our parishioners leave worship on this day, they will have exchanged their question marks for exclamation points – but a question mark is a good and fitting place to begin.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Holy God, creator of all, the risen Christ taught from scripture of his death, resurrection, and ascension into your glorious presence.

May the living Lord breathe on us his peace, that our eyes may be opened to recognize him in breaking bread, and to follow wherever he leads, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Of course, in the larger sense, ascension and resurrection always make a continuous theological point. They both claim that death has not ended an otherwise grand and noble project undertaken by Jesus – that the mercy and grace of God in Christ triumphs over all that would undo it. Moreover, ascension is typically intended as a claim that extends the promise of resurrection. It does so by asserting that the new life manifest in resurrection is enduringly located in the heart of God. It is not new life that lives only to die another day. Instead, it is new life that abides in God, and thus abides forever.