

"Who Would You Be in the Easter Play?" John 20:1-18
Easter April 1, 2018

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Call to Worship

Christians believe the good news that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done something decisive about death.

**All our human attempts to defeat death are pitifully inadequate,
But God's work is grand in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.**

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Prayer of Invocation

Rise up, people of God, and descend once more, Holy Spirit.

We meet at the intersection of heaven and earth. The cross and the empty tomb witness to your overwhelming love and our eternal hope. Fill our hearts with wonder, and our will with the resolve to share the glorious news: Jesus is risen! Christ the Lord is risen indeed! Amen.

The Word

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

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 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 know 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.

Living the Word

Welcome! Welcome to visiting family members and guests. Welcome to all who are here...But why have you come? The cross is empty. The tomb is empty. Could it be that you have come because you want to find yourself in the story?

To know who you are in the Easter story? What part you are to play today? Maybe you don't know why you are here. I know who brought you here. You may think it was someone sitting near you, but Christ has brought you here to experience a God so powerful that that even death is not the end. So I invite you to get as comfortable as your chair will allow, and open your heart to what God may have for you today and we once again take a look at the story of Easter.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Not on the cross, not in the tomb, where is he? If we were going to have an Easter play this morning, there would be a few parts to be given out. I invite you to consider the three main human characters with me and process if you could or if you do play their parts in your life.

The first part in the Easter story is Mary Magdalene's. Even though it is still early in the morning, she couldn't stay away. Thinking as she went that as painful as it all was, finally this nightmare is over for Jesus. But then she finds an open tomb. There is no reason to move the large heavy rock which had been rolled across to close the tomb, yet it had been moved leaving the opening exposed.

She then finds him missing and assumes that someone, presumably grave robbers, have taken his body. How fast she must have run back to the disciples to share this latest discovery. "They have taken Jesus out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid him."

The disciples respond with urgency as they take off running to find out what has happened. There is a foot race between Peter (playing part two of the Easter play) and the other disciple (playing part three of the Easter play). The one who was bound closest to Jesus in love arrived first, he was also the first to believe in Christ.

He is anxious to believe, and indeed does believe that this is as it should be, though he hasn't any understanding on how and why. He hasn't yet remembered all of the things Jesus said about 'on the third day.' He accepts that Christ is gone, though he is yet to understand the resurrection and its future implications, but he knows that this is a sign of the new beginning. He knows that something 'big' has happened here, where the body is gone and the grave clothes are empty.

This disciple knows that if someone had taken the body, they would have kept it wrapped in the grave clothes, not leaving them behind. For us, the reaction of this disciple shows us that even in the midst of the worst of things, God is still at work bringing new beginnings. God always gives us hope. Only someone who knows this promise of God, would immediately recognize that God is at work in the midst of it all.

As the church we can believe in the future through this same hope. We can sing the songs with conviction and proclaim that Christ is risen, not because we were there to witness or because we understand it all, but because, we know to watch for God at work in every situation and know God's presence in our lives.

The power of God's love continues to pervade the world. If you have been watching the gallon plastic bags, empty but a list of items, become a table full of hospitality bags with a new start for someone who has little or nothing, you have seen God at work to make a difference for people we will never meet. With some faith and a little encouragement God can work wonders within us as people.

When we live into our faith, working together and trusting it does make a difference, we build our faith. The next project, we trust more and become more and our faith goes more. Then on the day when our faith is tested, we can pray and wait to see what God has next for us. As in the past times, we can trust that God will bring us through and so we don't need to panic, just wait upon the Lord for what is to come.

Peter got there second, but was the first to go into the tomb. It was not really a race, but a scramble to find what has happened. Good old impetuous Peter, always the first to jump into things. Never holding back to wait, but is always quick to panic once he starts sinking. He sees the linen wrappings in one place and the head covering in another. In total confusion, the disciples went home.

But Mary stayed, and wept, though she must have been in confusion as well. We all grieve in different ways. There is no right or wrong way to feel as we all handle our sorrow and loss according to who we are and what we understand of death. Mary didn't know yet about resurrection and eternal life. We do and can view death as not the end, but a stage of our eternity.

Mary just wanted to be close and to hold on to the scraps that were left of Jesus' life. She bent over to look again into the empty tomb and she sees two angels, which doesn't seem to faze her, as they converse about her grief. Often in deep grief our realities get turned upside down and we can't even question what is happening around us.

Often in our grief, 'angels of a sort' are sent to stay with us. The phone will ring, or someone will be there to listen as we sort through what has happened and how life will now be different for us. God gives each of us the opportunity to be an angel for others. We feel urges to contact or pray for someone and if we do, they may share with us that our timing was perfect or they really needed to talk to someone just then.

But then Mary turns and sees another, whom she assumes is the gardener; she again shares her concern for the body of Jesus. She is all consumed with this new additional grief of the empty tomb. And then he says her name, Mary, in that way he has spoken it before and she remembers in her soul.

Mary's encounter is not abstract or just in her head. It is very real, moving, and deeply, deeply personal. At first she looks the 'gardener' in the eye, listens to him speak and doesn't recognize him. But when he says her name she recognizes Christ in the familiar. And she responds: "Teacher."

We yearn to be known by another well enough to be called by name. Psalm 139 acknowledges that we recognize that God knows us intimately, but we yearn to hear our name on the tongue of someone who says it with affection and love, because they also have grown to know us well enough to say it with some meaning.

When Christ says her name in 'that way' she recognizes him and responds with her name for him 'teacher.' Jesus has come to her with a gentle touch to her soul, by reaching within her to be made known in a way only he could. Whenever God comes to us we are allowed to feel the presence of our Creator, as that Creator knows us, personally and intimately.

Jesus is known in the place we have remembered God within ourselves. It is a trigger of memories that shoots through our system and takes us through all of the places we have known our Creator and back into this moment in an instant. Jesus even said earlier in John's gospel as he spoke of the Good Shepherd "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." And then "I know my own and my own know me."

That is why, as the people of God we are given the gift of places to go where we can hear God's voice, Christ whispering our name. When we come to church we gather to hear the voice as it says our name, bringing us into the Bible story. As we gather for Holy Communion and share the remembrance of Christ, still speaking in our midst.

In the singing of the familiar hymns of Easter or Christmas or any season as we lift our combined voices to seek and praise God and we know that together we are given more strength than when we are alone. As we sit together at a supper of soup and bread or roast chicken and potatoes, or in the morning over coffee at the café we are touched by the knowledge that we share more than just food to nourish our physical body, but fellowship for our every soul.

There was a television situation comedy in the 80s and 90s set in the 'Cheers' bar in Boston, Massachusetts, where a group of locals met to drink, relax, chat and have fun. The show's theme song was written by songwriters Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart entitled "Where Everybody Knows Your Name"

Making your way in the world today takes everything you got.

*Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.
Wouldn't you like to get away?*

*Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same.
You wanna be where everybody knows your name.*

We do all yearn for a place where we can be ourselves, someone will listen to our joys and concerns and we are known. At church we try to be a place like that where everyone is welcome. We try to be friendly and to bring everyone into the community. Strangely, sometimes the bar setting does a better job at it than the church does...

Cameron Murchison Professor of Ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary says this: "When nobody knows or calls one's name, one stands outside the embrace of the surrounding community. When one's name is known and called, one is enfolded in the community. The Easter community is a community whose members have heard the Good Shepherd calling their names. They join Mary in being enfolded in the divine life and presence of God."

When we come to a place where we can say each other's name, knowing that we, too, will be remembered, then we can make the announcement, as Mary did: "I have seen the Lord." She surely didn't have it all figured out. Her confusion was just as real as the disciples, but she could now open herself to what was to come with a new hope.

Often their confusion becomes our confusion. Some of us seek more answers and find in the seeking that we can live with the mystery of God, sometimes confused, but with a belief in God's assurance that we are never alone. Some of us just live in the confusion, unwilling or with little desire to know God better. That is a choice, but doesn't give much peace when life seems to be falling apart before you.

Those who were present with God at Ash Wednesday, The Sundays in Lent, the Good Friday Service and now Easter, have been walking a journey to the cross and now beyond the cross to resurrection. If you don't find time for your relationship with God, will you recognize your name when Jesus whispers it to you?

Like Mary we are called to share the Good News of hope through Christ's resurrection. We need to announce the good news "Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed." We all need good news and encouragement on a regular basis and that is why we remember again, the cross and the tomb, both empty as Christ is Risen again this year.

Can our faith be like Mary's: real, moving and personal. The Lord knows your name and awaits your search for him. Will you misunderstand? Will you share your concerns with Jesus? Will you run with the others? Will you search for Christ? Will you remember as you are always remembered? Will you tell the good news to others?

Maybe you did not find yourself in the character of these three principle parts, yet the celebration of Easter continues for the next 50 days; each week watch for the reactions of the others who were called disciples and followers. I know God will invite you back, we will welcome you...Will you come?