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John 20:1-18
Easter Sunrise, April 16, 2006

Which Disciple Are You?

This is the most ancient of Christian liturgies. I say, “The Lord is Risen,” and you all say, “He is Risen Indeed.” Let’s try it, shall we . . . “The Lord is Risen.” “He is Risen Indeed.” “The Lord is Risen.” “He is Risen Indeed.”

We have gathered in the proper place this morning, in the garden. And we have gathered at the right time this morning, early. According to John’s gospel, we’re on the right track.

Three of Jesus’ disciples play the main characters in John’s Easter story. Peter, fresh off his denial of Jesus in Pilate’s courtyard, Mary Magdalene, one of the courageous women who stood at the foot of the cross during Jesus’ execution, and the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved, who sat next to him at the last supper and was also present at the crucifixion.

The story opens with a flurry of activity unfamiliar to John’s normally poetic account. In the foggy dawn of this story, everyone is dashing about, running this way and that. I watched you as you arrived this morning, lovely dresses, beautiful hats, and sheek relaxed outfits adorned by friendly smiles and pleasant conversation. Walking, yes, strolling yes, perhaps even sauntering. I didn’t see any of you running, though. In today’s story all the disciples are running. There is something about Easter that produces excitement, energy, the kind of energy present at a track meet. Mary arrives first. I don’t know how it works at your house, but this is typical of our house. My wife is out of bed early every morning. She’s usually accomplished six tasks before I’m even in the shower. Faithful Mary is at the tomb first this Easter morning, while the male disciples are still sleeping, or cowering someplace in fear of the Romans. Typical. When Mary arrives at the tomb, to her horror, she sees that the stone has been rolled aside and the first thing she does is run. She runs away from the tomb. Heels kicking, back to the tomb, she bumps into Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved, who are finally out of bed. Winded Mary tells them what she has discovered. It’s bad news for now. The grave stone has been rolled away and that can only mean one thing, the grave robbers have already done their grizzly work. She passes the baton to Peter and the beloved disciple and they pick up the race, running in the direction Mary had just come from, back in the direction of the empty tomb. Mary is running away from the bad news, Peter and the other disciple run towards bad news. That’s how bad news works. It repels some and attracts others.

All of this takes place in the first four verses of today’s reading. In the next 14 verses, these three disciples encounter the resurrection of Jesus in three distinctly different ways. All three disciples can be found in the gardens this morning. Perhaps you will identify with one or another of them, or maybe even all three. I want to take a look at how each one experiences the resurrection of Jesus, and what we can learn from them about the joy of Easter.

The first is Peter. Let's call him Peter the detective. As soon as Mary passes the news to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, the two men take off at a sprint. John suggests they actually race one another to get the tomb. The first thing we discover about Peter, the same Peter who denied knowing Jesus, the same Peter upon whom Jesus will build his church, the one Jesus called the rock is, that, well, Peter runs like a rock. John makes a point to tell us that the other disciple outran Rocky to the tomb. Once again, Peter arrives late and out of breath. Peter gets into gear once he arrives, however. He is the first disciple to actually go into the tomb and take a look around. Peter discovers two things inside the garden tomb, the linen wrappings that had been around Jesus' body, and a cloth that had been on Jesus' head. That's enough for detective Peter. Wrappings, cloth, no body. Like Mary, he knows of only one conceptual possibility, "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him." Peter may not be a great athlete, but remember, he's the detective disciple. In a world of rationality, of cause and effect, with the laws of motion and mechanics soundly in place, dead bodies do not simply disappear. Somebody has to move them. So Peter leaves the empty tomb, still unaware of the Lord's resurrection. In fact Peter does not hear the extraordinary good news of Easter until much later, after Mary's encounter with the Risen Christ in the garden, after Mary rushes back to the other disciples in their homes saying "I have seen the Lord." Peter doesn't believe until Mary tells him, convinces him that his first impression was the wrong one, that his detective work was incomplete, that the good news is real, and death has been overcome forever. Perhaps some of you might identify with Peter, the detective disciple.

The second disciple is Mary, her story begins in sadness. Let's call her the disciple of hope. After making the awful discovery that the stone has been rolled away, and after telling detective Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, Mary returns to the tomb. The other two disciples analyze the situation and go home. But Mary does not leave with them. Rather, she stands outside the tomb and weeps. Hers is the broken heart of one whose hopes have been dashed and dreams destroyed. Mary loved Jesus, not by way of the *Da Vinci Code* myth of romantic love and physical chemistry. Her love is of the deepest, most abiding kind. She loved Jesus because Jesus loved her, a woman, perhaps even a prostitute. This Jesus, a man of some esteem, valued her. He gave her hope and purpose and a place in the world. He gave her a community to take part in and loving friends to support her. She has come to pay tribute to the body, to honor it as was the Jewish custom. Not only is Jesus dead, someone has robbed Mary of the last thing she could do for this man who had done so much for her. She had come to prepare the body, to bury it with dignity. And so she weeps when she discovers the body is no longer there.

It is then that Jesus appears to her. He says to her, "Why are you weeping?" The world looks blurry through tears and she does not recognize him at first, assuming him to be the gardener. It is not until Jesus calls her by name, "Mary!" that she sees and runs to hold him. Perhaps you are like Mary this Easter morning in the garden, remembering someone who has died. Easter is a fine morning to remember the dead and celebrate their resurrection with Christ. Maybe you know the resurrection because at some point in your life, perhaps when you were overcome by grief and sadness, you sensed Jesus calling you by name, putting his arms around you, assuring you that death does not have the final say, and the promise of eternal life can be glimpsed in a loved one's embrace. Mary then

goes to Peter and the other disciples proclaiming the good news, “I have seen the Lord.” Mary is the disciple of hope. Maybe some of you identify with Mary this morning.

The third disciple is the one whom Jesus loved. Let’s call him the disciple of trust. Not only is he faster than Peter, he is the first disciple to actually look inside the tomb. Mary is the first to see the stone is rolled away, Peter is the first to bodily walk inside, but this disciple is the first to get down on his knees and take a look inside with his own eyes. The beloved disciple is the first to see that the tomb is empty. At that moment, John says, he saw and believed. “He saw and believed.” The disciples recognize the resurrection in different ways. Peter leaves the tomb without knowing and has to rely on Mary to bring the good news. Mary sees the empty tomb and even has a conversation with Jesus before she recognizes him when he calls her by name. Later on, Thomas won’t believe what the others say until he actually touches the hands and side of the Risen Lord. But this disciple, the disciple of trust, the disciple whom Jesus loved, after one look in the empty tomb he sees and believes. Mary is the first one to proclaim the Lord’s resurrection. She is the first Christian preacher, the first one to say “The Lord is Risen!” But this disciple, he is the first one to believe. Perhaps the Risen Christ has never stood before you and called you by name as he did Mary. Jesus has probably never offered you his punctured side and bleeding hands, as he did to Thomas. Many of you may be more like this disciple whom Jesus loved. You believe because you’ve known Jesus for a long time and have come to trust him. Thus, when this disciple saw the empty tomb he did not think defeat, abandonment, a stolen body, or the laws of Physics. He thought freedom, victory, life, Easter. Death has been conquered forever.

Whether you are like Peter the detective, not sure of the evidence and perhaps a little skeptical, and you’ve come this morning because somebody else, somebody you love like Mary, has told you the good news of the resurrection and brought you to the garden. Or you are like Mary and you have come because you know what it is like to weep over someone you love, and you know what it is like for Jesus to call you by name, to put his arms around you and hold you close in the joy of eternal life. Or you are like the disciple whom Jesus loved, and you’ve been on a journey of discipleship for a long time, so long that you have developed faith and trust in the one called the Christ, and a quick glance in the empty garden tomb confirms what you know to be true. The good news is that the risen Christ came to all of them, and will come to all of us – one way or another.

And so my friends, “The Lord is Risen.” “He is Risen Indeed.”

Happy Easter.