

The Vigil of Easter – March 31, 2018

John 20:1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In our celebration of the Great Three Days we have passed over with Jesus from death to life and from darkness to light. We have heard the stories of God's mighty acts: the creation of the world, the creation of God's people, the rescue of God's people from slavery, God's surprising mercy on God's enemies, including God's own people when they were unfaithful to the covenant. These stories have now culminated in the mightiest of all God's acts: the victory over sin, death, and evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What this means for us now can be gleaned from our Gospel reading tonight from John. In this story, Mary Magdalene is the central character, and I have three takeaways for us tonight.

First, Mary comes to Jesus' tomb while it was still dark. This is not merely chronological information. Darkness and light is a central theme of John's account. You'll remember that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night back in chapter 3. John wants us to understand by this that Nicodemus was "in the dark," both literally and figuratively. He doesn't get what Jesus tells him about being "born anew" by water and the Spirit. "This is the judgment," Jesus tells him, "that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light..." So Mary comes to the tomb "in the dark." She doesn't get what Jesus had been telling her and the disciples, that his crucifixion was to be the instrument of our salvation, and that his dying would lead to his rising – and to ours. Mary is in the dark, and it will take her some time to finally be enlightened, as it were – to realize what has happened. And her first attempt to communicate her discovery of the empty tomb does not shed much light. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb..." She doesn't tell Peter and the other disciples about what she knows – that the tomb has been opened and Jesus' body is gone. Instead, she jumps to conclusions and makes up a story: "They have taken the Lord..." Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb in disbelief. They don't believe Mary. Women were thought to be unreliable witnesses in this culture. They think she's probably just being hysterical. When they get to the tomb, though, they see what she saw, and only then did they believe her. But John wants us to know that they did *not* yet believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The men go back home, but Mary stays at the tomb. She goes in again and this time sees two angels at the head and the foot of the grave. They ask her why she's weeping, and she repeats the story she told earlier. "They have taken away my Lord..." She is surprisingly sure about something she did not witness. Then she turns around and bumps into Jesus, but this story that she has concocted, with information she doesn't have, has such a hold on her that she cannot recognize him. A risen Jesus doesn't fit into that story. Instead she supposes him to be the gardener. Maybe he has taken Jesus away – which of course, being Jesus, he has, but she doesn't get it. She doesn't get it, that is, until Jesus calls her by name. And as soon as he calls her by name she recognizes him. She finally gets it. So that's takeaway one: coming to faith, moving from darkness to light, is a process. It's something that takes time, something that is complicated by our preconceptions and prejudices, and finally something that only Jesus can finally make happen.

Second, we infer from the story that Mary gave Jesus a big hug, or something like that. Maybe she grabbed his arm or his hands. Whatever it is, clearly she is overjoyed that he is alive and she does what anyone would do in that situation. She wants to hold onto him and never let him go. But Jesus will not let her hold onto him. Not in this way. "Do not hold on to me, because

I have not yet ascended to the Father,” he tells her. Which is a little odd, don’t you think? How can she “hold onto him” if he ascends to the Father? It’s what he says next that points to the answer, I think. “Go and tell my brothers, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father...” Jesus will not allow Mary’s relationship with him to be private. Jesus wants her to hold on to him only in the community of the faithful, because faith is not, and cannot be only private matter. It is something that is meant to be shared, nurtured, and strengthened in community. That’s the second takeaway.

Third, Mary becomes the first apostle when she is sent by Jesus with the message of his resurrection. There’s been a meme floating around on Facebook among pastor-types in the past few days quoting a famous 20th century theologians. “Without women preachers we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.” Remember that the next time someone tells you that women can’t be preachers. What I want you to see, though, is the difference between what she says this time as compared with what she said the first time. This time she does not jump to conclusions. She sticks to what she knows and has experienced. “I have seen the Lord.” And presumably she also relays the message the Jesus sent her with. So the third takeaway is this. We do not have to know everything and we do not have to be religious experts in order to proclaim the gospel. All we need to do is to bear witness to our own experiences of faith, and convey the promises of God’s love and forgiveness.

Those three things are our takeaways tonight: faith is a process that takes time and persistence, faith is not only a private affair but is meant to be shared and nurtured in community, and faith can be shared by anyone who has experienced it – and all of this because of what we celebrate tonight. Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)

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