

Sermon: “Jesus is Calling”

4/4/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Mary Magdalene had been tossing and turning all night. For just over two days, she and the disciples had been gathered together, trying to overcome the shock of what they had just seen and heard. Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior, the one to whom they had committed their entire lives, had just died on a cross surrounded by criminals. They had watched as he was beaten, scorned, and hung, and if they were not careful, they would be next. She had lost everything. They had lost everything. So Mary and the disciples went into hiding in Jerusalem, confused, afraid, and uncertain of what lay ahead. Some of the disciples, like Peter, James, and John, always had the option to go home. They had once been fisherman. If they wanted to they could take up their nets and begin fishing again. For Mary, though, there was no going back. So while everyone else slept, she got up quietly and set off to see the one person in whom she had placed her trust, the person in whom she had placed all her faith: Jesus.

That morning, Mary walked to the tomb under the veil of darkness. Slowly the sun rose and the place where Jesus’ body lay came into view. But, as we hear in our Gospel lesson for today, something was wrong. The stone that should have been blocking the tomb’s entrance was gone. Jesus had already been torn from her life when he died on the cross. Now his body was gone too? “Who would do such a thing,” she thought to herself. “Why couldn’t they just let him rest in peace?” Filled with shock and despair, and likely a bit of anger, she ran back to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved and told them the dreaded news, that the stone had been rolled away and that the body of their Lord and Savior was gone. Why did she believe that his body was no longer there? We’re not specifically told. Perhaps, she assumed that it had been stolen or

that the Pharisees and chief priests had moved it so that the tomb would not become a shrine.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that the empty tomb was no welcome sight. Not for Mary, not for Peter, and not for the beloved disciple.

After listening to Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb as fast they could, and much to their dismay, Mary was right. The stone should have been in front of the tomb had been rolled away and Jesus' body was gone. The beloved disciple, the faster runner of the two, stood just outside the tomb's entrance in shock, struggling to comprehend what his eyes could plainly see. But he just could not understand, so while he stood there, he watched as Peter rushed by and looked inside. All that remained, as we hear in our Gospel lesson, were the wrappings that had surrounded Jesus' body and the cloth that had been on his head, neatly folded a few feet away. There was no denying it. Jesus's body was gone. Gone from their lives and gone from the tomb, seemingly never to return.

As Peter and the beloved disciple left, Mary, who had arrived sometime later, remained at the tomb, weeping. We have no idea how long she stayed there, lamenting all that she had lost. What we do know is that at some point, amidst her grief, the most amazing thing happened. Before her appeared two dazzling white angels, one where Jesus' head had been laid and the other where his feet had once been. Two angels that asked her a simple yet heart-wrenching question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Now, I don't know about you, but if two angels appeared before me and asked me a question, I don't think I'd be able to get out a word, let alone string together a coherent sentence. I mean, Mary was talking to angels, to angels! But standing there in front of the empty tomb she did not stammer or stand there speechless. Instead, she simply responded, "They've taken him away and I don't know where they've put him." A simple response that warranted a simple answer. Before the angels could respond, though, we hear that

she was approached by a man, a man who asked her much the same question. “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Mary, convinced that the man must be the tomb’s gardener, said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” She could not yet see that her hopes and prayers had already been answered.

That day, Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple were guided by one inescapable fact: that Jesus was dead. And it may be tempting to condemn them for not having seen the signs and maintained their faith. After all, Jesus had told them any number of times that he would die and be raised on the third day, and they had just witnessed, as we hear in the Gospel of John, Lazarus be raised from the dead before their very eyes. Surely, they should have been able to hold out hope for the three days that Jesus had foretold. Then again, how many times have we heard and felt God working in our lives and struggled to understand God’s call? How many times have we failed to grasp what God is telling us when the answer is standing right there in front of us? The reason why it’s so tempting to condemn Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple, it seems to me, is because we already know the answer to the question. We know that light will emerge from the darkness, that Jesus was raised from the dead, that Jesus lives. But they did not. All that Mary knew was the grief and doubt that had overtaken her life, the hatred and death that she had witnessed over the past few days. Much like us, in our own moments of doubt and despair, she could not yet see the truth, even though it was standing there right in front of her. She could not see it until Jesus opened her eyes, and opened them with a single word: “Mary.”

Jesus called her by name, just like he calls each one of us by name, and in that moment everything changed. Suddenly, Mary recognized that the man standing before her was not the gardener, but Jesus, her risen Lord and Savior, her *Rabbouni*, her Teacher. After three long,

unbearable days, she longed to never leave his side. But Jesus told her that she must go. “Go to my brothers,” he instructed her, “and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” And as a testament to her faith, she immediately went, told the disciples what she had seen, and passed along the message that Jesus had told her. That their Lord and Savior was alive, that he had been risen and was waiting for them.

One year ago, Easter Sunday was a reminder of just how quickly and profoundly our lives had changed. Like Mary, as she went to the tomb early that morning, what was most on my mind, and I’m guessing yours as well, was all that we had lost. That day, I thought to myself, we would not be worshipping together in the sanctuary, greeting one another with handshakes and hugs, or doing our best not to sneeze because of all the flowers adorning the altar (okay, I must admit, that last one might just have been me). Easter is meant to be a time of celebration, during which we give thanks to God that Jesus is risen, that Mary and the disciples had their eyes opened, and that news of Jesus’ resurrection would go on to be spread throughout the world. But, I must admit, the emerging pandemic made it hard to celebrate. Like Mary, I was filled that day with loneliness, sadness, and anxiety over what the future might hold. Fortunately, both for her and for us worshipping here today, that place and those feelings are not the end of the story.

Jesus did not approach Mary outside the tomb and speak her name because she had run the fastest, like the beloved disciple, or believed the quickest, like Peter. No, he revealed himself to her because she was weeping, questioning, and stuck in her confusion. He saw someone lost amidst the darkness, wishing that she still had her Lord and Savior to turn to, and because of his love for her, his love for us, he went to her and showed her the light. Light that continues to shine amidst the darkness and to people like Mary, people who we might not expect. This Easter is a little brighter than the one before. As more and more people get vaccinated, it feels as if we

can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Truly, this is good news, news for which we should give our thanks and praise. One day soon, COVID-19 might just be defeated! And yet, we must also admit, our lives and this church will never be the same. Like Jesus' hands and feet after his resurrection, this past year will leave a mark on all of us, scars that we will take with us the rest of our lives. Scars that may sometimes cause us to weep, question, and get stuck in our confusion, but never leave us beyond God's loving reach.

This Easter, Jesus is calling each one of us by name, inviting us to do and be something more. To be Easter people, people like Mary, people who bring all that we are and have to God. People who, upon having our eyes opened, go out and share the good news with others, with the good news being this: that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is risen, that he is alive and waiting for us, just like he was for Mary and the disciples so long ago. Waiting for us to see and believe for ourselves that Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is risen! Yes, he is risen. He is risen, indeed! Glory to God! Alleluia! Amen.