

Life after Easter
A Sermon on John 20:1-18
Easter Day
April 1, 2018

Introduction

It is easy to preach the good news on Easter Sunday. “The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.” We all want to believe that Jesus has conquered death and that we will share eternal life with him.

Life should be different after Easter, but is it? We are still plagued by fear and insecurity. We live in an age of cynicism and despair. People are losing faith in institutions, the church chief among them. We are losing faith in each other. The partisanship that permeates our culture divides the world into us and them, those who believe the same things we do and those who don’t. We have given up on the folks on the other side of the partisan divide.

John’s Easter Story is exactly the good news we need to hear today. He shows us that life is different after Easter.

First Move: Footrace for Jesus

Today’s text introduces us to Mary Magdalene. All four gospels describe Mary Magdalene as one of the women who goes to the tomb on Easter morning. That is rare; all four gospels agree only on a few things. Her last name Magdalene probably means that she comes from the village of Magdala on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke describes Mary Magdalene as one of the women who followed Jesus, along with the 12 disciples, on his ministry in Galilee and financially supported them. Luke says that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene.

We shouldn’t confuse Mary Magdalene with other women in the gospel stories. She is *not* Mary, the sister of Lazarus. She is *not* the sinful woman in Luke who stood at Jesus’s feet and bathed his feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair.

New Testament scholars believe that Mary was one of the most prominent disciples during Jesus’s ministry in Galilee. Women were responsible for caring for the dead and preserving memories of them. Women often had meals in the tombs to honor the dead. They would sit in a circle, read Scripture and pray for the dead person. They would tell stories about the dead person. Early Christians held worship services in the tombs. Scholars believe that some of our traditions about the Last Supper may

have originated with women disciples who had funeral dinners in the tombs in honor of Jesus. Mary Magdalene may have originated and preserved some of these traditions about the Last Supper.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early in the morning, while it is still dark. The darkness symbolizes the faith of the disciples—they do not yet believe in the resurrection. Mary sees that the stone has been taken away from the tomb. The missing stone alone causes her to believe that Jesus' body has been taken, perhaps stolen. The thought that Jesus is risen doesn't occur to her.

Mary runs and tells Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, who is sometimes called the beloved disciple. The disciple whom Jesus loved appears only in the Gospel of John. Most scholars believe that it represents John's community or the leader of John's community. He first appears in John's version of the Last Supper, where his head is lying on Jesus' breast as they are reclining at a meal. He appears again at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jesus tells his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." In John Chapter 21, when Jesus appears to the disciples while they are fishing in Galilee, the disciple whom Jesus loved is the first one to recognize Jesus. At the end of the gospel, the author claims to be the beloved disciple.

Today's text has two stories: one about the empty tomb and another about an encounter between Mary and Jesus. We see the reaction of two model disciples, Mary and the beloved disciple, and how they recognized Jesus.

The beloved disciple runs ahead of Peter and gets to the tomb first. He bends over and looks in. Apparently this was the type of tomb that you had to crawl through to get into. Mary was unwilling to crawl through it while it was dark. The beloved disciple looks in and sees the linen cloths that covered Jesus' dead body, lying there.

Peter arrives and rushes into the tomb. Peter in the gospels is always described as the impetuous disciple, one who has courage to act.

John is not describing a rivalry between the beloved disciple and Peter. Peter is an important witness to the empty tomb.

The beloved disciple follows Peter into the tomb. The gospel describes his reaction simply and beautifully: he saw and believed.

John tells us immediately that his faith in the resurrection was not yet complete. "For they did not yet know the scripture that it was necessary for him to rise up from the dead." The beloved disciple sees only the grave clothes and an empty tomb.

The beloved disciple knows that the body has not been stolen. This is the disciple that Jesus loved because the disciple is filled with love. His love colors the way he looks at the world. It allows him to detect the presence of Christ. The Gospel of John does not have Passion Predictions like the other gospels. Jesus has said only

that he will be lifted up. The beloved disciple apparently believes that Jesus has gone to be with God. That is what Jesus has told them is eternal life, being with God. The beloved disciple believes that Jesus has eternal life and that he will share eternal life with his disciples.

The beloved disciple and Peter go away and return to where they had been staying in Jerusalem, apparently without speaking to Mary.

Second Move: Don't Hold Me

Mary is left alone, standing at the tomb, weeping. She bends over the tomb and looks in. Now there are two angels in the tomb. They are sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head, the other at the foot. The angels also are important witnesses.

The presence of the angels doesn't inspire fear in Mary as in the Gospel of Mark. The angels ask her why she is weeping. "They took away my lord, and I do not know where they placed him." She still believes that Jesus's body has been stolen.

Then Mary turns and sees Jesus, standing up. This is one of the most memorable scenes in all of literature. This is the scene that inspired the romantic fantasies in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The DaVinci Code*.

It begins with mistaken identity. Mary thinks he is the gardener. In John's gospel, the tomb is located near a garden. Jesus's appearance may have changed somehow—he is in transition to becoming a heavenly being--and Mary can't recognize him.

Jesus asks her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" He also asks, "Who or what are you searching for?" These are Jesus' first words in Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John. Jesus sees two of the disciples of John the Baptist following him and he says, "Who or what are you searching for?" The question is addressed to the disciples, but it is addressed to us, too. What are you searching for when you decide to follow Jesus? They respond by calling him Rabbi and asking where he is abiding. They want to abide with him, remain in permanent relationship with him.

Mary is hopeful that the gardener knows where Jesus is. "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you placed him, and I will take him."

Then comes the magic moment. Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." The good shepherd knows all his sheep by name and they come when they hear him call. Mary says, "Rabbouni," which is how Rabbi is pronounced in Aramaic. Mary stills thinks of Jesus as her Rabbi and not as the risen Christ.

Jesus tells her that the old relationships have been changed. "Do not hold me for I have not yet ascended to the father." Mary mistakenly assumes that Jesus is

ready to resume his earthly ministry and to resume the closeness of earthly relationship to his followers.

The good news that Jesus proclaims is not just that he is risen but that he is ascending to the father. That is good news that we overlook in the Easter story.

The permanent gift of the spirit comes only after Jesus ascends to the Father. The incarnation, Jesus' earthly ministry, lasted somewhere between one and three years. The permanent nature of his presence is the spirit. The spirit is the incarnation within us. Jesus says in the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 that it is the spirit that gives life.

Jesus tells Mary to go to his brothers and tell them that he is ascending "to my father and your father, to my God and your god." This is the first time that Jesus refers to the disciples as his brothers in the Gospel of John. The ascension gives Jesus a new identity. He is not only the Logos, he is the Son of God, who has gone to live with God. Jesus shares this new identity with the disciples. All who believe in Jesus are now children of God. Contemporary theologies often say that all people are children of God. In the Gospel of John, only those who believe that Jesus was sent by God and that he has returned to God are children of God.

Mary Magdalene runs and announces the good news to the disciples. "I have seen the Lord." She tells them what he said to her. This is the first Christian sermon. And the preacher is a woman. She saw and believed and announced. Every sermon since then proclaims the same good news.

Third Move: Stewards of Divine Love

The Gospel of John is poetic and full of beautiful symbols. One of the difficulties in reading the Gospel of John today is that we are philistines. We don't read poetry any more. We don't appreciate symbolism as an art form. We want to strain the poetry and symbolism out of the gospel and reduce it to facts and a simple ethical message: do this, this and this.

The Gospel of John has been called naive docetism by Ernst Kasemann, a prominent New Testament scholar in the mid-20th century. Docetism is a doctrine, which was later declared to be a heresy, that Jesus only seemed to be human. He was actually fully divine, even when he was on earth. Kasemann asks, what modern person can believe that a man descends from heaven, lives among us for a little while, then returns to heaven?

One of the most amazing images in our lifetimes is Earthrise. It is a photograph of the Earth that was taken on Christmas Eve 1968 by an astronaut on the Apollo 8 mission, the first manned space flight to orbit the moon. Earthrise is a color

photograph of what Earth looks like from the moon. It shows the Earth appearing over the horizon. It is a blue and white sphere in the sky. The heavens are dark behind it. It is stunningly beautiful. It stirred the popular imagination. Every boy wanted to be an astronaut in those days. My brother put a poster of it on the wall in our bedroom when we were kids.

Earthrise changed the way we think about our place in the universe. The Bible talks about heaven and earth as if they are two separate places. God is in the heavens, up in the sky, watching over us. We are down below, here on the earth. Earthrise shows us that the earth is *in* the heavens. We can no longer believe that the earth and the heavens are divided. They are a unity. The heavens are within us and around us. If God is in the heavens, then God lives within us and around us.

The symbolism of the Gospel of John can accommodate Earthrise. The distance between heaven and earth has been collapsed. The spirit connects the two realms. The spirit is God's power and presence, running in and through all things.

Our theology becomes naive when we literalize the mythology of John's story. The style of the narrative is similar to the theophany stories of Genesis 18 and Exodus 3-4, where God appears to Abraham and Moses and enters into conversation with them. This is the same sort of story. God takes human form in the person of Jesus. God is too abstract for us to understand unless we turn God into a person.

John would be the first person to tell us not to worship the symbol. A symbol points beyond itself. Worship the true source of life.

I love the gospel hymn, *In the Garden*. Many people find great comfort in that hymn. I am not sure that the author of the hymn understands what Jesus is telling Mary in the garden. When we romanticize the story, we cling to the earthly Jesus. The author of the Gospel of John is telling us to let go of the earthly Jesus and let in the heavenly Christ.

This part of the story is a transition from historical space and time to God's transcendent realm. Jesus is no longer of this world. The ascension makes possible a new and more intimate spiritual union between Jesus and his disciples.

Before Easter, we are sleep walking. We are spiritually asleep. Through our baptism we share in the death of Jesus on the cross. We die to our False Self. We let the ego die. We are no longer tied down by our old fears and desires.

We are awakened to new life through the spirit. This is what Jesus means when he says we must be born again or born from above. We are born not of flesh and blood but of God. Our spirit reunites with God. Spiritual rebirth and resurrection are symbols; they point to reuniting with God during this lifetime not just at the end of it.

Thomas Keating, a Catholic mystic, says that we respond to the grace of the ascension by expanding the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Christ gives a new commandment after the foot washing on Maundy Thursday: love one another as he has loved us. This is even more demanding. To love our neighbor is the highest form of human love. Christ calls us beyond that, to divine love. Divine love is the capacity to love without limit, even when that love is not returned. This is love, not to get something in return, but to love because it is in the divine nature to give, to pour out.

We are called to be stewards, to be channels of the immense energy of divine love, until the world is transformed by Christ.

Life after Easter takes us to a deeper level of existence. We come to see partisanship as our ego at work, wanting to prove that our way of political thinking is right. If we are filled with anger and self-righteousness, there is no room for the spirit of Christ.

That doesn't mean we accept the status quo. It means that we act out of love. We love the prisoner on death row and we believe that it is possible for the prisoner to be redeemed and for the family members of their victims to forgive them.

It means, to use Walter Wink's mantra, that we believe that the Powers are created good, the Powers are fallen, the Powers must be redeemed. We work tirelessly to change the system, but without demonizing the Powers.

Divine love is at the heart of King Lear, Shakespeare's greatest play. The play starts with King Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He asks his daughters to tell him which one loves him most. He will give the largest bounty to her. Cordelia, the youngest daughter, refuses to play the game. When Lear asks her what she can say to draw a third more opulent than her sisters, she says, "Nothing, my Lord. . . . I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more, no less." Lear tells Cordelia that her truth will be her dowry and disowns her. He gives his kingdom between the two older daughters.

Later in the play, Lear goes out into the storm after his two older daughters have refused to care for him in his old age. In a scene every bit as memorable as Mary in the garden with Jesus, Lear comes across Cordelia. He tells her that if she has poison, he will drink it. Her sisters have done him wrong. She has some cause. They have not.

Cordelia responds, "No cause, no cause." She still loves him.

Conclusion

Life is different after Easter if we wake up from our spiritual slumber and let the love of Jesus flow through us. The beloved disciple saw and believed in divine love. If we believe, we will let go of our need to feel superior. We will simply love people, because that is what God is like.

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