

“As She Cried”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday

Psalm 118:19-26

Rev. John Wahl

John 20:1-18

Since we changed our clocks five weeks ago, on March 13 – springing forward into Daylight Savings Time – there has been a lot of debate about eliminating these twice-yearly alterations. The senate has voted to make Daylight Savings permanent, but others still argue that an early sunrise may be better for our health and well-being than a later setting sun.

Most of us know that disorienting feeling of being awake when it still pitch-dark outside. Falling asleep might be elusive or maybe something weighing on your mind awakens you long before dawn. The darkness often means uncertainty, lack of clarity, delayed understanding.

On Easter, we celebrate the dawn of a new day, when light interrupts the darkness and the Son of God – the light of the world – rises to new life. We sing our *Alleluias* because death’s darkness is defeated and hope gives birth to new understandings and possibilities. As the Gospel of John declares, in the very first chapter, “the light shines into the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

In all four gospels, there are women who come to the tomb early on Easter morning. In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene comes alone; it is still dark; and she arrives empty-handed. Because the body had already been fully prepared and buried, there is no need for spices and aromatics. Thus, Mary enters into the garden grave only with her grief.

What she initially saw is that the stone used to seal the tomb has been rolled away. Rather than look inside, she runs back to tell the disciples, who – themselves – run to the tomb to see for themselves. They look inside and believe – as Mary did – that, yes, the body is gone; but return home because they are, as yet, unable to understand or testify as to why this would be. In this way, John stretches out the interval between the time of Christ’s resurrection and the point when his closest friends recognize it.

Mary chooses to remain at the garden grave, in the darkness of unknowing uncertainty and grief. Her weeping means, literally, that she is blinded by her tears; four times, we are told that she is weeping. When she does bend down and look inside the tomb, she sees two angels, dressed in white. Typically, in scripture, when people encounter angels, they are filled with shock and fear; Mary, so overwhelmed by her loss, and blinded by her tears, simply wants to know if they know where the body of her Lord might be.

When she turns around, as she cried, Jesus is standing with her; but – maybe because of those tears – she is unable to recognize him. Because they are in a garden, she assumes this must be the gardener; who else is she expecting to see? Like the angels, this man asks her why she is crying and what she is looking for. It is only when he says her name that she understands who this is standing with her in her grief. She turns to him, to touch and hold on to him.

Throughout the season of Lent, we have been talking about turnings: how word turned to flesh when Jesus raised his friend, Lazarus, from the dead; how the master turned servant when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. We looked at how Peter, the disciple, turned denier when asked if he was a follower of Jesus; how the hero lauded as king on Palm Sunday turned into a criminal arrested and tried; how the praising turned to taunting as Jesus was condemned; how *Hosanna!* turns to crucify as Jesus is sent to the cross.

Now, on Easter Sunday, we watch as darkness turns to light; lack of understanding turns into recognition; blinding grief turns into joyful sight; and the hopelessness of death turns into new, abundant, and eternal life. Mary wept because she had lost her friend, was mired in mourning, and could not imagine any other reality. She was stuck in darkness, not really knowing what she was looking for. When Jesus says her name, she is able to make the turn; she “finds her sorrow dispelled, her vision transformed, and her life graced with new possibilities.”¹

Each of the resurrection stories in the Gospel of John (here, with Mary, with Thomas, and then with Peter) emphasize the individual and Jesus. In encountering the risen Christ – face-to-face, hearing his voice, and touching his body – each disciple experiences a life-altering turn: from blind grief to clear sight, from disbelief to faith, and from shame to forgiveness. The incarnation is not a generic concept, Jesus comes to us in the unique specificity of human expression.²

¹ Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*

² Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*

When we find ourselves in times and places of grief, disbelief, and shame, when the world around us sometimes seems so dark that we aren't sure what it is we are even looking for, we may lament not having such face-to-face encounters with Christ. Where – in the midst of all the sickness, violence, and division we know and see – is our turning?

When Mary reaches out to Jesus, she seems reluctant to let him go. But Mary – the first witness to the resurrection – has a message to share; a testimony to give. “Go to my brothers and sisters,” Jesus instructs her, “and tell them ‘I am going up to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.’” Here, Jesus is speaking not just of what is to come but reflects the entire purpose of his incarnation. The one he calls “Father” is not his *abba* alone. In life, in death, and – now – in his risen life, Jesus is opening the way for humanity to have the same relationship with God that he has.

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, the work of Jesus is described this way: “he gave them power to become children of God.” The mission of the Son is to offer those who receive him a relationship with God like the one he has. Jesus tells his disciples that he is going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, so that “where I am, there you may also be.” (John 14:3) Jesus is opening his home and his family to them.³

Jesus' life before his death was not lived for himself alone – he came not to be served by others but to be a servant for others – nor is his risen life for himself alone. The way Jesus knows God and is known by God – even the way Jesus is one with God the Father – this “at-one-ment” is also for us. Jesus' relationship with God is also ours. The love between the Father and the Son is enlivened in resurrection so that it might be ours to share with other brothers and sisters.

God desires to be in relationship with us; to know us as sons and daughters; to welcome us home. The risen Christ appears to each of us in unique and specific circumstances; often when and in ways that we least expect. It could be in the midst of confusion or grief, of sadness or self-doubt, of aloneness or shame. Sometimes, in such moments of revelation, we don't have the luxury of holding on, because there is a job to do, a message to share. Thus, we learn that being a witness is not a passive act: God is calling us, nudging and sending us.

But today, in Resurrection's light, we turn amid the busy-ness, weariness and uncertainty of this world to sing our *Alleluias!* We ponder the miracle that Jesus is risen and the blessing that Jesus came to be with us, among us, and one of us. His Father is our Father and his God, our God; and thus, as fellow sisters and brothers – as the church – we worship and work together to give God all honor and praise. Amen.

³ Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*