

“First Light” – John 20:1-18 – Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday! Day of days in the Christian church; focal point of the Christian year. Once again we gather to celebrate, to listen to the resurrection story. One might think that this story would get a bit ‘old’, a bit ‘stale’ hearing it over and over again. But it doesn’t, at least not for me. This is the most exciting story in scripture, and each year there seems to be a different emphasis, a different understanding. Not substantially different, because the foundation of the story remains the same, indeed we usually read the same version of the story every year. But there always seems a particular emphasis that surges forth in any given year, and this year for me the emphasis is about Christ being among the living.

Not that all Christians share this emphasis, and certainly the secular world and media are happy enough to ignore it. For example, in the past few days the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin has been shoved into the public eye by the publication of another book on the subject. The book attempts to refute some careful scientific analysis that was done a couple of years ago, analysis that came to the conclusion that the shroud was a fake created in the Middle Ages. The recent book argues that what the scientists tested was fabric that had been used to repair the shroud in the Middle Ages, but that the shroud itself is really the burial cloth in which Jesus was wrapped before being laid in the tomb.

Does it matter if the Shroud of Turin is real or not? Not really, because the real cause for celebration is the resurrection – that Jesus rose as the Christ triumphant over death. For those of us in the Reformed tradition the resurrection triumphs even the crucifixion – that’s why in Protestant churches we do not have crucifixes, but instead empty crosses.

Scripture, and this reading from John’s gospel especially, clearly moves us beyond that suffering; puts the passion of Jesus into perspective; shifts the focus from death to living. The very way the events unfold in this divine story move us in that direction. John scripts here a two-act play directed by God that reveals the magnificent meaning of that moment. The first act is about death, darkness, and despair; the second act is about shining light, and the glow of God’s grace illuminating Mary, the disciples, and the whole earth. We are propelled along with Mary Magdalene from darkness into light, from despair into bewildered joy; from solitude into discipleship and communion.

Let’s take another look – the story goes by so quickly when we read it. The story opens in darkness, and quiet. “Early on the first day of the week, when it was still dark”, the text begins. Darkness, cloaking the furtive movements of Mary Magdalene, slipping through the streets to go to the tomb where the bruised, beaten and battered body of Jesus had been placed. She moves cautiously from deep shadow to deep shadow, knowing that she is at risk from the patrolling soldiers because of her known association with this criminal who had been executed. The very fact that she is taking this risk helps us to feel her despair: there was no good reason for her to go to the tomb, she would not be able to lift, roll or slide away the cover by herself, so she can only be going there to be as near as she could be to this man who had so completely changed her life.

And the darkness deepens. In the same way that the night darkens just before the dawn, the darkness of her despair deepens also, as she discovers that the tomb has been opened, and it lies empty. Running to gather Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, she cries to them that the body of the Lord had been taken out of the tomb, and is now missing. Sharing her grief and confusion, these two disciples race to the tomb, discovering that she was telling the truth, and return back home in confusion, not yet understanding the meaning of it all. So deep is the darkness of their despair and confusion that not even their faith is enough to illuminate the

fulfillment of scripture happening right before their eyes – they fail to grasp the meaning of the first big clue that this is not merely a further desecration of his body. They fail to note that the head wrappings had been carefully rolled up and set aside. The confused and saddened disciples return home, leaving Mary alone in her darkness as the first scene comes to a somber close.

The curtain reopens on the second scene with Mary still alone in her darkness, weeping outside the tomb. But her first action of looking into the tomb provides the first ray of heavenly light to shine through as she sees two angels in white, who ask her, “woman, why are you crying?” She answers them through her tears. Again the question is asked of her, but this time by Jesus, standing there. The earth is now bathed in the light of the world, but still Mary cannot see that it is Jesus. Finally, he calls her name, and recognition and understanding flood in like the burst of daylight as the sun clears the horizon and dispels the darkness. “Mary!”, he calls to her, and she responds by calling him “Rabbouni!” That is the dramatic moment when the full impact of what was happening lights up for Mary Magdalene like a movie set under arc lamps; this is the moment that she understands that what Jesus had foretold them had indeed come true, that on the third day God would raise him up again. New light floods the corners of the darkness of despair, with God’s grace shining like the fresh, clean light of a new day. New hope, with the recognition of a whole new way of relating to and with God. New life, as promised by the one now risen again, the one who declared “I have come that you might have life, and life abundantly.” The shift is complete, the darkness dispelled, the new light and life given by God in Christ.

But there’s a third scene also, a scene that hasn’t yet finished. “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” This third scene opens with Jesus’ promise of ascension into heaven, and with that promise is tied all his other promises: new life; the gift of the Holy Spirit; assurance of his presence and of reconciliation and forgiveness. The focus is now clearly shifted away from grieving, and into celebration of the living Christ.

This is a wondrous drama that we could watch a hundred times or more, and be moved by it each and every time. But it is not a story merely to be heard, a play simply to be watched and enjoyed. This is a story about Christ among the living, and we are to live this story. We die with Christ in our baptism, the apostle Paul tells us, and we live as one with Christ in his body, the church. By the waters of baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit God claims us and calls each one by name. God unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection and also grafts us into the body of Christ as members of the church. This story is about Christ living among the living, and this resurrection story calls us to remember how we came into that new life.

We are – in our turn – the living among whom Christ lives. Live this story. As you watch the resurrection story move from darkness into light, remember the times you were sunk in your own despair, feeling cut off from all that was important to you, and remember also how encountering the risen Christ has brought you back into light, and life. I’m sure we can recall the many times we were confused, adrift and questioning, seeking to find faith even as Christ stood right beside us. Blessed are you if you can identify and remember that moment when you heard Christ call you by name, and so much came clear, and God’s grace flooded into your life. Blessed are we all as we realize the wondrous gift of new life in Christ, freely offered to us.

And just as this magnificent and divine story didn’t end there at the tomb, but went on with Mary being instructed to “go, tell the others”, the story continues also for us as we live it. We, like Mary, are also commanded to “go, tell the others”, to proclaim to them by our very lives the joy that we have found in encountering the risen Christ. Like Mary Magdalene, and the other disciples, we won’t always be running with breathless excitement – there will be times when it

seems like hard slogging, just as it was for them as they continued to spread the message of God's redeeming love sealed in the new covenant of Christ's blood to the whole world. Some days we find it grueling to do that just in our little corner of the kingdom. But the message is about living, and living in and with the risen Christ, and it is his presence with us, supporting and uplifting us with his Holy Spirit, that gives us not just the strength but also the joy to continue going and telling the others.

On this glorious Easter Sunday morning, hear once again the marvelous story of the resurrection, the rising again from death of Jesus as the Christ, and be reminded yet again that this is the story of God's grace, God's forgiveness. This is not a story of revenge, of punishment, of death. This is a story about life and living. This is a marvelous affirmation of redemption, of new and abundant and rich and joyous life shared with Christ who lives among us. This is a story of the grace of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to whom we give all thanks and honour and praise.