

“It’s About Living” – 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 the story calls out especially about the triumph of life and living over death and dying.

That may be in no small measure due to the huge emphasis this year on the suffering (gosh, is the term ‘Passion of the Christ’ now copyrighted, and we can’t use it in public worship, even though it’s been the church’s property for two thousand years?) and death of Jesus. Now I’m not saying that the suffering of Jesus on his tortured journey from the trial to the tomb was unimportant – heaven forbid! But I am claiming that 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. It’s almost like a two-act play directed by God to reveal 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 slipped from deep shadow to deep shadow, knowing that she was at risk from the patrolling soldiers because of her known association with this criminal who had been executed. The very fact that she was 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 could 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 deepened. In the same way that the night darkens just before the dawn, the darkness of her despair deepened also, as she discovered that the tomb had been opened, and it lay empty. Running to gather Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, she cried to them that the body of the Lord had been taken out of the tomb, and was now missing. Sharing her grief and confusion, these two disciples raced to the tomb, discovered that she was telling the truth, and went back home in confusion, not yet understanding the meaning of it all. So deep was the darkness of their despair and confusion that not even their faith was enough to illuminate the fulfillment of scripture happening right before their eyes, that they failed to grasp the meaning of the first big clue that this was not merely a further desecration (that the head wrappings had been carefully rolled up and set aside), and so the disciples returned home, leaving Mary alone in her darkness as the first scene comes to a sad close.

The second scene opens 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, and again the question is asked of her, but this time from 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!” (Perhaps she hadn’t read Mel’s script because John at this point tells his Greek-speaking readers that she spoke to Jesus in Hebrew, neither of which apparently were authentic languages of the day according to the movie!) But that is the moment when the full impact of what was happening was lit up for Mary Magdalene like a movie set under arc lamps; that is the moment that she understood that what Jesus had foretold them had indeed come true, that on the third day God would raise him up again. New light flooding 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 closed. “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, a scene 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. It’s about 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 grafts us into the body of Christ as members of the church. It’s about living in and with Christ, and this resurrection story calls us to remember how we came into that new life.

Live the story. As the resurrection story moves 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 how encountering the risen Christ has brought you back into light, and life. I’m sure we can recall the many times when 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, we hear once again the marvelous story of the resurrection, the rising again from death of Jesus as the Christ, and we are reminded again that this is the story of God’s grace, God’s forgiveness: it is not about revenge, about punishment, about death, but is about living, about redemption, about new and abundant and rich and joyous life with, and in, Christ, to whom, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, we give all thanks and honour and praise.