

Sermon: Easter Day C (John 20:1-18)
4 April 2010, Christ Church Riverdale
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John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (NRSV)

The most awkward moment in most funerals comes at the very end. You've been through the church service; you've gone to the cemetery, prayed at the graveside, and the family has put flowers on the coffin. Now comes the awkward part--people have this hesitation about leaving. Of course they don't want to rush off; of course they want to pay their final respects, but it's more than that. People seem to know deep down that when they leave the cemetery, they'll be facing life acknowledging the loss is real, that the loss is permanent.

I wonder if this is why Mary Magdalene stays around the tomb after Peter and the disciple Jesus loved have left and gone home. Mary, of Magdala, a town on the Sea of Galilee; Mary, who Jesus healed; Mary, who helped support to Jesus' ministry financially; Mary, who was there to see Jesus crucified and taken down after that brutal end. Mary stays at the tomb weeping. Now we may think of her crying quietly, but Middle Eastern women aren't known for grieving quietly. Wailing and shrieking would probably be more like it. Why does she get to the tomb so early--while it was still dark? Maybe she couldn't sleep. Who knows how much she slept that weekend--it's not necessarily rational, it's profound grief on the heels of profound trauma--having to watch someone you love so much not just die, but be executed with deliberate brutality.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary has finally summoned the courage to look inside the tomb and two angels ask her this question. As if Jesus' dying wasn't enough, now grave robbers have added insult to injury. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Maybe this is when she realizes it's time to leave, when she knows it's time for this awkward lingering to end. All the text tells us is that she turns around. When she does, she sees somebody we know is the risen Christ, but she thinks is the gardener. There are all kinds of theories as to why she doesn't recognize him. To me it's enough to know that as a woman out by herself in that society she's not going to look at a strange man full on, much less make eye contact. And remember, she's wailing and sobbing. Not only does Jesus ask, "Why are you weeping?" but a question that is absolutely crucial: "Who are you looking for?" "Who are you looking for?" The answer is obvious, and Mary gives it, like anyone who is grieving, she has to tell the same thing over and over to different people. And it's just as obvious she is not looking for a risen Christ.

"Miriam!" "Mary!" The Good Shepherd, Jesus has told us, calls the sheep by name but he doesn't say anything about the tone of voice. Now it could be gentle and tender, but I think of it as loud enough to get through Mary's wailing: "Miriam!" as in, "Get hold of yourself!" "Rabbouni!" "Teacher!" It's no wonder Jesus has to say, "Don't hold onto me," because if I saw someone I loved so much die and then here they are a few days later in front of me alive, I'd be all over them, too! But Jesus has a job for Mary: go and tell. "Go and tell the others about me." Peter and the beloved disciple have seen that the tomb is empty; they've seen the burial cloths set aside, but Mary is the first to see the risen Lord, and to tell about it. "Apostle to the apostles," she's often called.

Now it would be easy, too easy this Easter, to point out the empty organ chamber behind me to my left, to remind you that our organ died not three days ago, but three years ago and that starting tomorrow it will be re-installed to begin a powerful new life. It would be too easy to draw that to your attention, so I won't! What I will say is that we are a church under construction, preparing our empty spaces again to burst into song, building another ramp outside to making our property accessible to all God's children, however they get around, repairing our bell so that our times of worship will again ring out through our neighborhood. We are a church under construction, not just in bricks and mortar but a living church, a community growing in faith. Both kinds of construction are for the same purpose, so that we can keep telling about Christ's resurrection--telling in word and deed, nearby and abroad, in love and service!

One of the glories of Easter each year is how we bring the praise-shout "Alleluia" out of the hibernation it's been in during Lent. "Alleluia!" is all the more meaningful for our not having sung it for 6 1/2 weeks, but one place this year didn't stop saying Alleluia during Lent. The Episcopal Bishop of Haiti had his diocese practice its Alleluias all through Lent, because in the midst of so much grief it can be so difficult to believe that resurrection is possible. What are we looking for? In Haiti, you have to look *hard* to find resurrection.

In her sermon at the Easter Vigil last night, Posey Krakowsky spoke very movingly about

a woman in Port-au-Prince days after the earthquake who kept singing over and over "Alleluia. Amen!" In funerals we say, "Even at the grave we make our song, "Alleluia; Alleluia; Alleluia!" but in Port-au-Prince there weren't even nearly enough graves to bury the dead. We would think this woman had absolutely no reason to keep singing Alleluia, and yet sing it she did, and sing it the Haitians do. Not because things are good, but because they trust the power of a God who brings new and abundant life literally out of the grave. Resurrection in Haiti will be found not just this Sunday but for years in to the future as they rebuild with better buildings, with a population less concentrated and vulnerable to this kind of disaster, with a society more just and better-functioning.

"Alleluia Amen" isn't just a celebration of how things are, but of how we trust God that they will be in the future. Like he did Mary Magdalene, Jesus calls us by name and sends us to spread good news with every fiber of our being--yes with our voices, but also working up a sweat in service. The grave was robbed that first Easter morning, but not the way Mary thought; not by people taking Jesus' body away. The Grave--not just Jesus' grave but every grave--was robbed of its finality. What are we looking for? Jürgen Moltmann writes, "When we expect the resurrection of life from death, we can and will give ourselves wholeheartedly to this life here and surrender in love to the beauties and pains of this life. We need not hold ourselves back, we must not reserve ourselves. We must give ourselves to life" This is the opposite of hoarding our lives--it is giving freely because we trust we too will be raised. "Christ is risen!" isn't just good news; it's the greatest news, and not just for us, but for everyone on earth!