

Wesley United Methodist Church
Easter
April 16, 2017
Easter News
Text: Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

This is the day when God turned everything upside down and things have never been the same since. Today is not the end of something but the beginning of something greater than anything that could be imagined. On Friday, it seemed to the disciples as if it were the end. Jesus was dead and their hopes and dreams destroyed. Most of them had left family and home to follow Jesus. They had high hopes for the future, but the last week had left them devastated. Peter had denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was, and most of the disciples had fled to safety rather than stay around to watch Jesus die.

The four Gospels tell us slightly different things about what happened that day. It is important for us to remember that there were no reporters standing by, no cameras to record the events, and as with any time that people retell a story, different things get emphasized. So it may seem that there are some contradictions between the four Gospels, but they all agree on the most important things. The Gospel of John is the only one that claims to be an eyewitness account to Jesus' ministry. Most scholars believe that it was written by John, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' disciples. Throughout the gospel, John is rarely mentioned by name, but usually referred to as the "One Jesus loved."

Early on that morning, while it was still dark, women who came to the tomb found it empty. The first assumption was that someone had stolen Jesus' body, which would have added insult to injury. But soon, they discovered something that none of them had imagined or would have

thought possible, despite the fact that Jesus had told them what would happen. It was beyond their comprehension of how the world worked so despite what Jesus had said to them, they were not prepared for the biggest surprise of all ... Jesus was alive! From that moment, everything changed and we have never been the same.

As we follow John's announcement of the Easter news, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark. She expected to find a large stone blocking the tomb but much to her amazement the rock was gone. Mary didn't hang around to try to figure out what was going on. She ran to find Peter and John, described as the "disciple Jesus loved" and believed to be the author of the Gospel.

She shared her assumption and great fear, that "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." Naturally, she assumed that Jesus was still dead, so the only explanation that made sense was that someone had moved Jesus' body.

Mary did what most of us do when presented with something we can't explain or don't understand. We attempt to make sense of it in some way so we come up with an explanation that makes sense to us. The person we were supposed to meet has been in an accident, or they are being inconsiderate and keeping us waiting. Our boss calls us to the office – We are either being fired, or promoted. It can be an eye opener to pay attention to our first assumptions about how to explain something. It often tells us a lot about our approach to life and what we believe.

Peter and John immediately ran toward the tomb. John arrived first. He could see that the tomb was empty; that Jesus' body was gone, but he did not go inside. Perhaps he was a little more cautious than Peter who went inside immediately. Peter was always impetuous. It seems that he

always acted or spoke quickly, without really thinking about what he was doing, or what he was saying. John followed Peter inside, and he writes that “he saw and believed”. He doesn’t tell us what he believed, but does say that at that point they did not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead. I tend to think that John and Peter simply believed what Mary had told them, that someone had taken Jesus’ body. John tells us that they returned to their homes. I can’t imagine that they would have simply gone back home if they had believed at that point that Jesus was alive.

Mary is the one who hung around. She stayed by the tomb weeping. Eventually, she became aware of someone behind her and assuming it to be the gardener, she asked where Jesus’ body had been moved. She did not recognize Jesus. She didn’t expect to see him – remember that she thought he was dead. It wasn’t until he called her by name that she realized who he was.

We have likely all had the experience of seeing someone we know in a location we didn’t expect to see them and not recognizing them at first. The bigger issue for us is that we often do not recognize Jesus in our daily lives. We may fail to recognize him in the face of a stranger, a homeless person, an injured person, someone in need of our help or compassion or simply our time.

Jesus told Mary to go to the disciples and tell them that “I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God.” While there are differences in what each of the Gospel writers tells us about that morning, in a culture where women were not accepted as witnesses at trial or dispute, all four Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb and that she was told to go and tell the disciples the incredible news that Jesus was alive.

Somehow this fits with everything else that Jesus did. Jesus was always the one who ate with sinners. He was the one who broke all the conventions. He talked with and welcomed those who were considered to be the last, the lost, and the least. So, it makes sense that the first person to see Jesus alive was a woman – Mary Magdalene – and that she was charged with the responsibility of telling the disciples the unbelievable news that Jesus was alive.

What does all this mean to us?

For one thing, I think this means that we do not need to understand everything. We do not need to make sense of things before we can believe. It is normal for us to have questions and God is big enough to handle all of our questions. The disciples didn't know, didn't understand that Jesus would die. But he did. They didn't know, didn't understand that he would rise from the dead. But he did. We don't know, we don't understand how that could happen, but it did.

If we limit our faith to only the things we can understand and explain then, I fear that we are putting some pretty serious limits on our faith and on our life. Most people agree that Jesus was a great teacher, a moral man, but if he is only that, then there are many great teachers and moral men throughout history. If we believe in only the things we can touch or understand, then it might be good for us to turn off our computers, televisions, cell phones and all the other things that we use daily but probably have little or no real understanding of how they work.

Faith often comes before understanding. It comes to us as a gift. If you have ever had a child, you can probably identify being in love with the child long before he or she was born – long before you knew anything

about your child or what he or she would be like. Faith comes first. Sorting it out comes later.

I believe that Easter reminds us that like Mary, we often do not recognize Jesus when we encounter him in the life of others. In Matthew's Gospel, we are told that whenever we feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe those in need, or do anything for another person, it is just like doing it for Jesus. In our political debates, we often tend to lump groups of people together with generalizations instead of remembering that each person is a precious child of God. In our busy lives, we tend to make snap decisions about the actions of others based on our expectations rather than being open to the unexpected possibilities that may surprise us. We may not recognize Jesus in the words of a hymn, in the touch of a friend, in the smile of a child.

Easter reminds us that like Mary we often want to fix things or clean up a mess in life. Mary wanted to locate Jesus' body and place it someplace where it would be safe. We want to solve problems, make things okay, and help them make sense. Easter reminds us that resurrection is God's work and it is not something that we can tidy up or explain. We cannot return things to the way they were before – and that is good. All things are new and nothing will ever be the same. Because of the resurrection, we have the confidence that Jesus is always with us. Because of the resurrection, we have the hope and the promise that death does not win and that nothing “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”ⁱ

I believe that just as Mary was told to go and tell the disciples, each of us is sent to go and tell. The word of God's love, the word of Jesus' resurrection is dependent upon us sharing the news with others. There is an apocryphal story told, that when Jesus returned to heaven, the angels asked him what the plan was for people to know about him. Jesus replied that he had told Peter, James, John, Mary and others and that he was counting on them to tell others and for those who heard to continue to tell others. The angels wondered what would happen if somewhere down the road, people forgot to tell the story and asked Jesus if he had an alternative plan. Jesus replied that he did not. That he was counting on each of us to be faithful and to tell the story.

Mary went and told the disciples that she had seen Jesus; that he was alive. It is up to each of us to share the Good News as we know it and have experienced it. For some of us that sharing may take place in public settings, but for far more it will take place in conversations with one or more people, often at times that we least expect. For all of us, that sharing, witnessing, will take place primarily through the way we live our lives – the way we show love to others, the way we respond to the needs around us, the way we treat those with whom we live and work and play and those we encounter on a daily basis or in passing.

Easter has changed the world forever. It will never be the same. Thanks be to God. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Let us pray: *God of wonder and mystery, we give you thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that has been made known to us in the words of scripture and in our lives today. Like Mary, standing astonished in the garden, we do not always recognize your presence with*

us. But when we hear your voice, we can truly say: “We have seen the Holy One, and we know that Christ is risen.” Alleluia! Amen. (Abingdon Worship Annual 2017)

¹ Romans 8:38-39