



“The First Easter Sermon”

Text: John 20:1-8

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Yesterday a picture popped up on my Facebook account. Apparently, at some point in the past I had posted a picture of my family at Easter. I was probably four at the time. We were all dressed up in nice Easter clothes, pretty dresses for my mother and myself and suits for my father and brothers. Easter, with the beautiful Easter lilies decorating the church, crocuses and other flowers beginning to bloom. New life. Resurrection. Everything is good and well with the world.

But on that first Easter morning, nothing was good with the world. The man the disciples had been following for the past three years was now dead. What would happen now, without a leader? Perhaps Peter could take over, but they couldn't think of any of that now. They were too traumatized by what they had just seen two days before. Jesus, crucified on the cross. This wasn't supposed to happen. And so there they were. Huddled together in that room. Grieving. Crying, perhaps wailing at times. Someone always keeping watch in case the religious leaders came looking for them to arrest. Perhaps some slept from sheer exhaustion, or tried to eat. They had no idea what they were going to do. No one noticed that while it was still dark, Mary slipped out.

Mary went back to the tomb. She apparently wanted to be close to Jesus even if it was just to sit next to the tomb. How many of us while we are grieving go to the graveside to sit and remember and cry? That's what Mary was doing while it was still dark out. She probably hadn't been able to sleep well and so she goes. But when she arrives, she sees that the stone has been rolled away. So she runs back, in grief and in horror, she proclaims to the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him." And so Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved sprint out of the house and race to the tomb to see for themselves. Jesus is gone, but the linen wrappings are there. We aren't told what they thought upon seeing the empty wrappings, the empty tomb. We only know that after seeing this, they left and went back to the other disciples.

The scripture then returns us to Mary who must have followed Peter and the Beloved Disciple back to the tomb. For once again there is Mary, weeping as any of us do when a beloved one dies. Weeping, and now more greatly distraught because now not only is he gone, but his body is gone too.

It is here that the two angels appear - one at where Jesus' head would have been and one where his feet would have been. And they ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" That may have seemed like an odd question to ask someone who has come to a new grave, but for the angels who know that Jesus lives, they ask her why she is weeping. However, Mary is still stuck on the fact that she had witnessed Jesus die. He was dead!! She couldn't get past that fact. She, like the disciples, cannot remember his words of a future and a hope. And so she answers, "They have taken him away, and I don't know where they have put him."

And then she turns and sees another man who asks her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Her answer is another repetition of the theme, "I don't know where they have taken him." She is stuck in this groove of grief, this firm belief that Jesus is dead.

Aren't we like Mary at times? When God doesn't fit neatly into the box of our belief system, we might just walk away, as Peter and the Beloved disciple did when they saw the empty tomb, or we might act like Mary: senselessly, stubbornly repeating our view of the truth even when evidence of the contrary stands right before us.

But that all changes when Jesus says her name: Mary. It is all it takes for the night in which this story begins to turn to light. She was in darkness, but now she is in light. Her eyes are opened. She recognizes her Savior's voice. And isn't that the way it is for all of us? Jesus calls each of us by name, too, urging us to recognize him as our RISEN Lord! What keeps us in the dark? What keeps us from seeing him when he's standing right in front of us? What prevents us from reaching out as Mary apparently did, naming him as our beloved teacher and Lord?

Theologian Karl Barth says we come to worship to answer this one simple question: "Is it true?" Is it true that God exists? Is it true that God created a perfect world, and that humans were part of that creation? Is it true that God wanted us to love God the same way God loves us, freely, and of our own choice, so God made it possible for us to choose not to love God back? Is it true that we messed up and that is why God sent God's son - God's deep and abiding love for us - and that through that Son, Jesus Christ, that God sought to reconcile us to God and to show us just how deeply God's love is for us? That through Christ's death and resurrection we might have eternal life with God? Is it true?

How often have you asked yourselves that when you have found yourselves in the midst of a difficult or painful situation? When the life you expected to lead makes an unexpected turn. Is it true? Do you exist, God? Do you love me? And if so, where are you when I am going through this painful experience?

At the Hollywood Presbyterian Church years ago, the pastor was doing a children's sermon on Easter morning. This children's sermon was observed by Bible scholar Frederick Dale Bruner who recounts it this way. The pastor asked the children, "What do you suppose was the first thing Jesus said to the disciples after he was raised from the dead?" One little boy instantly jumped to his feet, flung his arms out wide, and declared, "Ta-Da!!!"

But as Bruner observes, funny though this little story is, the truth is that Jesus did not do any grand flourishes of the "Ta-Da" variety when he appeared to people after the resurrection. He did not burst through any front doors to sweep in with a razzle dazzle and proclamations of "I'm BAAACK!" No, he usually crept up from behind. From behind the weeping Mary in John. From behind the disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus.

It is in quietness and in understated ways that Jesus assures us he is really alive again - now and for all time. He comes to us not with a flourish, but with the simple question of "Why are you crying?" That is where the disciples and Mary found Jesus on that first Easter morning. Quietly present, but alive.

Today we gather together as a family, but each with our own hopes and dreams, sorrows and griefs, disappointments and fears. We may ask, "Is it true?" But if we look and listen, then we will see that it is. Jesus is present to us just as surely as he was present for the disciples and Mary. He is alive! And if he finds us weeping, he will call us by name and remind us that he is indeed alive. Mary saw Jesus and ran back to tell the disciples, to preach the first Easter message, "I have seen the Lord!" He is alive, indeed! That is the Easter Message. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

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