

EASTER

A Surprise Ending

John 20:1-18

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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Journeying through Lent this year within the framework of a good story has been helpful to me. I have seen new things in this story of God and God's love that I hadn't experienced before. That has been especially true for me as I prepared my sermon for this Easter Sunday. I believe that everything in a well-written story or movie is there for a reason. Ask the Faith and Film group here at church. I can find meaning in lots of places. It isn't an accident that the little girl is wearing red or that we are told what seems like a piece of meaningless information. Its significance will probably become obvious later or at least we will have to wrestle with its presence.

When we enter Easter through the window of story, we experience it differently. I remember my son telling me he had gone to see a Spiderman movie with a friend. As they were walking out after the movie his friend said, "That was ridiculous. Nuclear fission doesn't work that way?" "Really, that is what you got out of that movie?" my son said. "There was a man who turned into a spiderman and shot webs out of his hands. You didn't find that part ridiculous?"

Easter usually brings us to questions about what actually happened in the body of Jesus. But as I thought about Easter within the framework of story, I asked myself different questions than I normally do: "Who are the characters in this story? What is unique to each of their experiences? Why did the gospel writer tell the story this particular way? Is everything in this story there for a reason?"

As you know, the story of Easter morning is told differently in each of the four gospels. I wonder if that is because there are no eyewitnesses to the resurrection. Not one of the four accounts claims that there was a person present when the stone was rolled away and Jesus came out of the tomb. That confounds my 21st century mind. It feels like we have been moving toward this climatic moment the whole time and no one was even present to see it? Could it actually be that is not the part of the story on which the gospel writers want us to focus?

This year we are looking at Easter through the eyes of the Gospel of John. This Easter story begins with Mary Magdalene heading to the tomb. She goes while it is still dark outside, not dawn like in every other gospel. John loves images of darkness and light. She goes alone unlike every other gospel account. When I enter the story through John's eyes, I imagine it as a morning like this one. A time like this one, when everything seems dark and a foreboding. A morning like this one when we know the light is coming but it is not here yet. We can sense it.

A morning that follows a time of our deep abiding grief and pain. A morning in the midst of a pandemic.

Mary isn't going to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial. She is going because she can't help herself. She has to be near to what is left of Jesus. Her whole soul is filled with aching and longing. Sleep isn't possible. She wants what she used to have. Perhaps you know what that feels like. I knew a man once who rode his bike every day to visit the cemetery where his wife was buried...every day...rain or shine.

When Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb, she is thinking she will sit down outside of it and pour her heart out. She wants to ask why this had to happen. She wants to say she is sorry she didn't throw her body in the way of the soldiers nailing him to the cross. She wants to ask what she should do now. But when she gets there, she finds that the stone has been rolled away. She doesn't even bother to look in because she knows what she will see. It will be empty. Jesus' body will be gone. It doesn't even cross her mind that he has been resurrected. She is certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that someone has taken his body. "They can't even stop humiliating him when he is dead," she thinks. So, she runs back to get reinforcements. She gets Peter and the unnamed disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.

These two men run to the tomb like it is a competition. The unnamed disciple gets there first and peers in. It is like a crime scene, in which forensics hasn't shown up yet. But when Peter arrives, he boldly runs right in. He sees that Jesus' body is gone and that the linen that covered his face is rolled up in a ball and tossed in the corner. The other disciple follows Peter inside the tomb. We are told that the disciple whom Jesus loved believed but didn't understand. Does believing require understanding?

Then the two of them just turn around and head home. Back into hiding for fear that what happened to Jesus will happen to them. No one sings the "Hallelujah Chorus." No one exclaims with a victorious voice, "He is risen!" They turn around and go home and leave Mary Magdalene to her grief.

All alone again Mary Magdalene, weeping for her loss and filled with anger at whoever needed to desecrate Jesus further, finally peers into the tomb. The other two found it empty but when she looks in there are two angels sitting there. They say, "Why are you crying?" "Duh, isn't it obvious. They have taken Jesus' body and I don't know where he is now."

In her frustration she spins around and runs into Jesus. She thinks he is the gardener. If everything is there for a reason, why does John have Mary confuse Jesus with the gardener? Does she not recognize him because he is ghost-like? Is he the actual bodily resurrection of the man who died on Golgotha beaten and bloodied? Is he really the gardener and he represents the idea that Christ is alive in everyone we meet? Does it even matter? I wonder if calling Jesus a gardener is actually John's way of leading us back to the beginning....to the Garden of Eden

where God breathed life into Adam and Eve. Is Jesus the gardener because he offers us new life? Because he reconnects us to that from which we have been separated?

Jesus asks Mary the very same question the angels in the tomb asked her, "Why are you crying?" "For whom are you looking?" asks the one for whom she is looking. But she doesn't see Jesus in this man before her. She stood at the foot of the cross. She heard him say, "It is finished." She saw the life drain out of him. She saw the soldier pierce his dead body with a spear. She watched them take his body down off the cross. There was no life left in Jesus. Jesus was gone. There was no changing that in her mind.

With her frustration growing by the second she says to the Risen Christ, "If you have taken Jesus' body somewhere, please tell me where and I will go and collect him myself." "Mary," he says. "Rabbi? Rabbi."

It was in the speaking of her name....through their relationship that she finally sees before her the one she never expected to see alive again. She isn't the only one who had difficulty seeing the Risen Christ right before her. Remember in the Gospel of Luke, when Cleopas and the other disciple didn't recognize Jesus the whole journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They only saw him when he breaks bread with them.

Remember how Thomas refuses to believe that Christ is alive until Jesus makes the journey to him. "Touch me. Feel my wounds," Jesus says. Thomas responds in wide-eyed wonder, "My Lord and my God."

We just saw the disciple whom Jesus loved walk away from the tomb that morning, believing and not understanding. He goes back into hiding. Days later, when several of the disciples decide to go fishing, Jesus come and stands on the shore and gives them some fishing advice. "Cast your nets on the other side of the boat." Peter is annoyed by the stranger but it is the disciple whom Jesus loved who recognizes Christ and says in a hushed voice, "It is the Lord."

There is something in these individual encounters that give each of these people new eyes ... through the love that speaks Mary's name....by the love that wants to be in communion with Cleopas and the other disciple...by the love that makes the journey to Thomas and says, "See where love and suffering meet"...by the love that meets the disciples in the ordinariness of their days.

Each of them thought they would never see him again. They thought it was over. Surprise, surprise. It isn't over. They all had an encounter with the Risen Christ. All of them were reconnected to the one who called them to new life...to see with new eyes....to live in the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He had been there all along, they just needed to see him in the breaking of bread; in the speaking of her name; in the suffering love; in the midst of the everyday.

You know why this story is told differently in the four gospels? Because it isn't about the moment in time when Jesus came out of the tomb. It does you no good to ponder what exactly happened in Jesus' body that morning. That isn't the climactic moment. This isn't a scientific story. It doesn't matter that nuclear fission doesn't happen that way. You don't have to understand to believe. The Easter story is told differently because this really is our story. It is about our encounter with the Risen Christ. Only we can tell this story. Only we know what caused us to open our eyes and see Christ before us....who it turns out was there all along. The Easter story is as individual as our fingerprint.

How did it happen for you?

How has the gardener invited you to reconnect to that from which you felt separated?

How did the stone that was rejected become your cornerstone?

How did love roll the stone away and give you new life?

Amen.