

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury, CT
Sermon – Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005

“Encountering a Risen Christ”

John 20: 1-18

Easter/A, March 27, 2005

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It was still dark as Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. Dark not only describes the lack of light in those predawn hours, but the lack of light in her soul. Mary was grieving. Her world was shattered by the cruel and agonizing death of her beloved Jesus just three days ago. With him Mary’s hope died. She had no idea what would happen next. She was still raw with grief, but she made herself go. She had to go.

This is where we often make our deepest and most poignant discoveries, in the darkness. It is where Mary meets Jesus and it is where we may meet him too. We discover the risen Christ in our own darkness, the darkness of denial, the darkness of a diagnosis, the darkness of betrayal, the darkness of rejection, the darkness of death. No one is ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope can not be seen. This is precisely where we find Mary.

This sense of darkness, of despair, of grief and longing compete with our cultural images of Easter. The world would have us focus today on butterflies and bunnies. Yet, the preacher Craig Barnes reminds us that “this day is not about bunnies, Springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It’s about more hope than we can handle.” More hope than we can handle. I wonder, are we ready for the resurrection? What if Jesus is simply dead? We can handle that. But, we have no idea how to handle the resurrection. We are not yet ready for the rebirth and renewal and new life that the resurrection promises. That will come, but first we must journey with the disciples, to encounter what awaits them in the tomb, to allow the pain and the joy of this event to penetrate our souls.

As Mary makes her way to the tomb under the cloak of darkness, she remembers. She remembers how it used to be. The way he spoke to her, how he accepted her as part of the circle, the way he loved so many. She remembers how he stood up to the authorities with such unyielding strength. She hoped it would be like this forever. Was it not just one week ago when we shouted and waved and welcomed Jesus as if

he were a king? What kind of king is crucified on a cross between two thieves? Where was his power now? What happened to the crowds in those few short days? Is Mary the only one left? Did it have to come to this? Was it what he said...the first shall be last, love your neighbor and pray for your enemies. Was it what he expected...sell all that you have, give to the poor and follow me? Was it what he did...heal the sick, eat with sinners, welcome the stranger, include the women, bring to life those who had died? She wandered in desperate silence to put an end to these nagging questions.

As she approaches the tomb Mary knows something is wrong. The stone has been rolled away, it is not as it should be. Instead of going in any further, she runs to get others, Peter and John, to come to investigate with her. The men outrun Mary and when they reach the tomb, they go inside. There they see a pile of clothing and the wrappings that had been on Jesus' head neatly folded. Seeing this was enough for the men to believe. Believe what? That Jesus was not there. That he had risen as he had told them. We do not know what they believed. All we know is that Jesus is missing. He is not where they had laid him. The men ask no questions. They simply return to their homes.

Mary can not run away. She is not satisfied. She needs to know more. A neatly folded pile of wrappings and an empty tomb are not enough. Finding the tomb empty is more than she can bear. She sits down and in her frustration she weeps. She weeps at the thought of this being the end. She weeps because she can not say goodbye, say in the dark what she could not say as he hung there dying. She weeps because someone has robbed her of the chance to pay her last respects in the quiet of the morning, alone. Jesus is gone. When Mary sees a couple of angels sitting in the place where Jesus was supposed to be, she is not at all impressed, but hoping they might help, she tells them, "they have taken the Lord." Then a man assumed to be the gardener asks why she is weeping. All Mary wants is for someone to give her back the body of Jesus.

Finally, the gardener, who is the risen Christ, calls her by name, "Mary." She joyfully responds "Rabbouni!" as she recognizes who he is. She wants to hold him, to never let him go, to soak in the gift of this reunion. However, to our dismay, and Mary's, Jesus says, "Do not cling to me."

Why not? When the prodigal son returns everyone celebrates and I am sure there was plenty of hugging. When we are reunited with a long lost friend or loved one there are tears of joy and longing embraces. When Jesus brings Lazarus back to life I am sure there was more than one hug. Certainly, this moment deserves a hug. Mary only wants to hold Jesus for a moment, a joyful moment. However, Jesus can see

into her heart. Mary hopes against all hope that if she were only able to hold him, then things would be all right. Now that he has returned they can get back to normal. Perhaps these last few days were only a bad dream. But, Jesus says to her, “do not cling to me.”

We can not cling to the past. The only way out of the darkness is to move through it and the only one who can lead us is the risen Christ. There is no going back. It will not be as it has been. Everything has changed. This is like nothing they have ever experienced. This is different. Resuscitation means resumption of physical existence. This is what happened to Lazarus. Coming back to life, one can resume one’s life as before. Resurrection means entry into a different kind of existence. Until we discover a new vision of the Savior, a savior who has risen out of our disappointments, out of the darkness, we’ll never understand Easter.

We have to leave the tomb. We can not stay there. We thank God for Mary, for in her, seeing was not believing. She was not satisfied with the signs. She had to encounter a risen Christ, one who called her by name, before she could move forward. I wonder, are you more like the other disciples? Are you too easily satisfied or too easily frightened? I think it was not faith that sent Peter and John rushing home, but their fear. If Jesus was not where they had put him, then something terrible must have happened and they were not going to stick around to figure out what that meant. Did Jesus rise from the dead on the third day just as he had told them? Was it a case of grave robbery? Or was foul play involved? They would not know because they did not stay long enough to find out. Only Mary, in her stubborn grief, was there to experience what Jesus had intended all along.

If the risen One is the gardener, who else could he be? Has the risen Christ appeared to you, making himself known to you by calling your name as he did with Mary? Have you met the risen Christ in the attendant that brought you your lunch at Hartford Hospital or the woman who bags your groceries at Stop and Shop or your beloved third grade teacher. Did you meet the risen Christ in your youth group leader who took you on your first mission trip or was he the last man to receive his meal last Wednesday at South Park Inn?

Craig Barnes says, “What the Gospels ask is not do you believe? But have you encountered a risen Christ?” If Jesus is no longer in the tomb, then what is going on? Where will we find him? It is really no big mystery. He has risen. He is on to something new and he wants to take us with him. That is why he tells Mary “do not cling to me.” There is no time for clinging. Clinging to Christ keeps us attached to the past, to what has been, instead of dancing into what is yet to be. Clinging is safe, moving forward is risky. If we run off too soon, Jesus will find us. He will call us by

name, release our joy, and send us out into the world to share our experience with others.

You get the feeling Mary was never the same after Easter. Are you? No one is the same once we have learned that what matters is not that we be confident in our hold on Jesus, as Craig Barnes says, but confident in his hold on us. Seeing that, we are ready for anything. St. Symeon the New Theologian wrote these words nearly a thousand years ago. He reflects on what happens when we are transformed by an encounter with the risen Christ, when the risen Christ dwells within us. He wrote,

We awaken in Christ's body
As Christ awakens our bodies,
And my poor hand is Christ. He enters
My foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand and wonderfully
My hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in his Godhead)

I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning
Do my words seem blasphemous?—Then open your heart to Him
And let yourself receive the one
Who is opening up to you so deeply
For if we genuinely love Him,
We wake up inside Christ's body.

Is this not the miracle of the resurrection, that Jesus is alive in us and through us, transforming all things? Think of the possibilities. No wonder the first two disciples ran for their lives. It is awesome to ponder that someone might experience the risen Christ in me, that I might be Christ for and to someone else. In whom have you encountered the risen Christ? When have you been Christ to another? After the resurrection, nothing is “normal.” That is the good news. After encountering a risen Christ, we realize that there is no more normal. Jesus is out there, or perhaps even within us, and we will know him when he calls us by name. May it be so. Amen

Source:
Craig Barnes, “Savior at Large.”