

Sermon for Easter
March 23, 2008

John 20:1-18

“I Have Seen the Lord ”

Back a few weeks ago I asked a colleague how Lent was going, expecting to hear about programming and special services at her church. In response she shared with me a loss she had experienced, which was making Lent with all its somberness and darkness more difficult. She was having a hard time overcoming her despair, and Easter seemed a long way off and not at all certain.

I expect my friend was feeling somewhat like Mary felt as she found the empty tomb that Easter morning. Mary too had no hope of resurrection. “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” Her sense of loss was final and irrevocable; she couldn’t even find the body to anoint it.

I am sure many if not all of you are well acquainted with loss. Probably you have known loss, which was significant enough to discolor the dawn, even the dawn of Easter morning. You may be feeling that sense of loss this morning as you struggle to put on a brave face in your Easter best. It may have to do with a relationship, an illness, a death, the loss of a dream, disappointment in your career or employment, problems at school. It is likely that many of you are aware of a sense of loss in several of those areas. Your loss is real, and when it is before you, it is every bit as great an obstacle as the stone sealing Jesus’ tomb. And even should that sense of loss go away for awhile, you, like Mary, know that even though the stone is rolled away, there lies a body about somewhere.

And so you come to the tomb this morning with Mary not at all certain what to make of the proclamation of an empty tomb.

There were others who came with Mary that Easter morning. There was that unnamed “special” disciple whom it says Jesus loved in some particular way. He enters the tomb, sees, and believes even before being convinced by scripture. You know the kind, often infuriating with their ready faith. It seemingly comes so effortlessly. They waste no time searching about for lost bodies. Christ is risen! “I’m so happy, and here’s the reason why.” And if you enjoy that kind of faith this morning, rejoice, and be gracious with Mary, who sees only a missing body.

Peter is also present, and it is tempting to be like Peter. Most of us respond like Peter much of the time. Mary tells Peter, “They have taken away the Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” Peter runs to the tomb, goes right on in, inspects it, and then goes home. No word about belief or unbelief, no indication of his feelings, only activity – on the go. That is how most of us are tempted to deal with our loss – keep busy. Don’t stop too long, for if you do, the despair, grief, anger catch up with you. Run fast, busy yourself, do, do, do.

Fortunately for those who know loss, Mary did not do that. She lingered behind, waiting, not even sure what she was waiting for. Probably simply because she did not know where else to go, she waited. And as she waited, she heard her name called. "Mary." She had been talking to the Lord and did not even know it. She was not rebuked. Jesus did not say, "What is the matter with you? Look at that other disciple who did not even have to see me, and he believed. What is your problem?" No, just, "Mary."

In calling her name, Jesus showed that he knew her and knew her loss. Mary recognized him, and hope and resurrection became realities for her. Recognition is a key component of resurrection faith. It was when disciples recognized Jesus present with them after his death, that the reality and the hope of the resurrection came alive for them. With Mary it was when Jesus spoke her name, with two unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaeus it was when Jesus broke the bread at table with them, for Thomas it was when Jesus showed him his wounds.

I don't know how long you have been waiting to hear your name called, to recognize the risen Christ in the midst of your pain and loss. For some of you it may have been a very long time. I cannot guarantee that you will come to recognition today, but I can bear witness that thousands and millions of others have waited with Mary; have gathered at Christ's table; have seen Christ suffering with them; and have known despite the darkness and despair which have overcome them, that the risen Christ is present and is calling their name.

So I encourage you to wait this morning. In the presence of your loss, wait. Linger awhile longer. Come to Christ's table. He calls your name. He does not condemn you in your fear, and questioning. Instead he comes with love, and healing, and joy. Listen, the risen Christ calls your name. Come, that your eyes may be opened, and recognizing him, you will be able to say with Mary, "I have seen the Lord." Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!