

On The First Day of the Week

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 20: 1-18

Delivered on April 21, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

It is the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene goes out to the garden early in the morning on this day before the sun is up, not to find the risen Christ, but a dead body. A dead body that symbolized a great tragedy. Two days earlier, the Lord did not just die in the way that we usually experience death. He didn't die in a hospital bed with his head resting comfortably on a pillow, surrounded by loved ones, get well cards and flowers from friends. Instead he was murdered—and he was murdered in such a way that was designed to inflict the maximum possible pain and humiliation. After being beaten and whipped, and finally crucified with a crown of thorns put on top of his head, Pilate had a sign put above Jesus which said “The King of the Jews” to mock him, to say “Look at this man, look at this man who claimed to be a king. Look at him now,” and the inscription was written in three different languages so everybody could read it. Dogs have died with more dignity than that with which our Lord died.

But our Lord wasn't murdered by Ted Bundy or by Charles Manson, or by someone whom we could hope would be punished. He wasn't murdered by someone that we could hope that the authorities would prosecute so that the scales of justice which had tipped against him would balance out again. He was murdered by the government. He was murdered by those in power. There was no one to prosecute. There was no one to punish.

It is difficult to describe the utter sense of defeat, the utter sense of humiliation that the disciples must have felt, that Mary must have felt as we find her early that Sunday morning as she is making her way to the tomb in the darkness. For you see, the death of the Lord for Mary and the disciples was the death of all hope, and because it was the death of all hope, when she

got to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away, her first thought was not “Hallelujah, the Lord is risen!” Her first thought was that this was just another part of the whole narrative of hopelessness that began two days earlier. Not only was the Lord betrayed, denied and crucified but now someone has even stolen the body. So what did Mary do? Well, she ran to Simon Peter and another disciple who is not named and she said “They have taken away the Lord and we do not know where they have laid him.” So, together the two disciples ran to the tomb. The other disciple outran Peter and made it to the tomb first and he bent down and looked in, but he didn’t go inside. Then when Peter got there he went in. He saw the linen wrappings lying there in the tomb and the cloth that had been lying on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then, the other disciple came in and he saw and believed. But not Mary. Since in her mind, this scene of an empty tomb was not about a risen Lord but a stolen body, she stood there crying outside the tomb. She then looked in and saw two angels sitting there, but they did not announce that they were angels. They simply asked “Woman, why are you weeping whom are you looking for?”

“They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him,”

The next thing that happened was that Mary turned around. Someone was standing there. A man with a beard, in his early to middle thirties. He must be the gardener. He repeated the question the two strangers asked in the tomb, “Woman why are you weeping, who are you looking for?”

She said, “Sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.”

He said to her “Mary” and it was at that moment that she knew that this was no gardener. “Rabbouni—teacher” she said.

He says to her “Do not hold on to me, Mary, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” And so Mary goes out to the disciples and says “I have seen the Lord!”

So that is the story of Easter. That is the story that we tell and retell and tell again with the arrival of every spring. As I look out over our sanctuary this morning, I imagine that despite all our different names and ages and different lives, I am basically looking at two kinds of people this morning. I imagine that I am looking at two kinds of people when it comes to this whole Easter story. I am looking at one group of people who has no doubt whatsoever about the story we tell this morning, and in fact you can’t recall a single moment in your life when you have ever had any doubts. To you, the risen Christ is as alive today as anyone else in this sanctuary that you can reach out and touch. But there may be others here among us who just aren’t so sure. You don’t know if this story we tell every Easter is really what happened or it is just a story. Maybe you say to yourself “I would have to be there myself in the garden with Mary before I actually believed in the risen Christ.”

Well, if you are in that first group, and you’ve never had a doubt about this story, I think that is wonderful. You are to be commended for having such faith. If you are in the second group, let me tell you that while in your life you may have only been in churches that would say you have no part of our Easter celebration if you have such doubts, we don’t say that here at Northminster. You are welcome here at Northminster. But ask yourself this. Isn’t it interesting, isn’t it interesting that while so many people say they have doubts that Christ is raised from the

dead, no one has any doubts about the story we told in this church three nights ago. No one doubts that the Son of God who showed nothing but perfect love to people could have been betrayed by one of his own followers, denied by another and put to death as a criminal even though he had nothing to even spend a single night in jail for. I have never heard anyone say I just can't believe things could ever be so bad for Jesus. I just can't believe people could be so unfair to him. I would have to be there myself and see all these things before I believed that.

People have doubts about the story we tell on this day but no one doubts that things could go so wrong for our Lord. And you know what? That isn't just true of us; it is true of Jesus' own followers. Mary wasn't going out to the tomb that morning expecting to see the Lord alive, and even when she was looking right at him, she still didn't see him. She looked right through him, expecting him to be the gardener. She didn't believe at first either, and maybe that's because we know all too well what this world is like. We know that this world is full of cruelty and injustice and tragedy. And that's why not only do you never hear someone say, "I just can't believe the story of Good Friday" you also never hear anyone say "I just can't believe there could be regimes in this world like North Korea that violate people's most basic human rights, I have to go there and see it before I believe it." You never hear people say "I just can't believe that in this the richest nation in the world, millions of people have to make a choice between paying their bills and buying food. Before I believe something like that I have to go out and count all these people one by one first." You never hear people say "I just can't believe that so many people in this country are killing themselves with opioids every day, I have to go to all our national emergency rooms and see all these people for myself before I believe it."

And you never hear people say these things because these are things we have come to expect in this broken creation of ours. In this broken world of ours that has been broken and dying ever since the Garden of Eden, these are the kinds of things we have come to expect. But the story we tell about that first Easter Sunday is not a story about the same old broken creation. It is a story of a new creation.

And that is important, I think, because I often hear people talk about Easter as if it is a part of the circle of life. They observe that we don't celebrate Easter when everything in nature looks dead, the trees are all bare, and the animals hibernate but we celebrate it when everything starts to bloom and all the furry creatures of the earth wake up. But as remarkable and as magical as all of that is every year, it would be a mistake to see Easter as part of the annual rites of spring. For you see, all of that is a process in our natural world. There is nothing natural about the story we tell today. Easter is not *The Lion King*. It is not about Elton John singing *The Circle of Life*. Nothing that is a part of the story we tell today is a part of this old world or a part of this old creation. As the apostle Paul says in this new creation of Easter Sunday, Jesus is the second Adam, the second Adam like the first Adam in the Garden of Eden, and Christ, he says, is the first born from the dead.

What took Mary so long to figure out what was going on? She found an empty tomb, she found two angels sitting in the tomb, and she looking right into his eyes, and still even after all that, she didn't understand. Well, you know what was wrong. It wasn't easy for her to recognize what was happening right before her eyes because she was still a part of the same old creation that we are a part of, and in that old creation animals may come out of hibernation and flowers may bloom, but dead people do not get raised from the dead, never to die again.

If you have doubts this morning, there is nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with saying “I want to see this before I can believe it.” That is what is to be expected in the old creation. But haven’t we been through enough in this old creation? Haven’t all of us suffered enough in only believing that things are hopeless and they can never really be hopeful except in stories and in fairy tales? On this Easter Sunday ask yourself if you believe there really could be a new creation, in a new garden, just like the old Garden of Eden, on the first day of a new week, just like the old creation started on the first day of a seven day week. And if not, why not? If not, why not? May all of those who come here with doubts this morning ask this of ourselves, and when we learn that we can find no satisfactory answer to these questions, may we find the faith, that like Mary, allows us to go out into the world and proclaim “I have seen the Lord!”