

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

April 24, 2011 - Easter Sunday

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — JOHN 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

SERMON

The events of the past three days all seemed like a blur to Mary, who grew up in the little town of Magdala. On Thursday evening Jesus was arrested while praying in a garden outside the city walls. By the time the word reached her he was standing trial in front of a hastily called religious court, led by the High Priest.

On Friday morning she discovered that Jesus had been transferred to the Roman headquarters, because the Roman governor, Pilate, who made his home in Caesarea by the sea, was in town.

By the time Jesus appeared in public she barely recognized him. He had been beaten mercilessly. Whatever you thought of the movie, "The Passion of the Christ," they got this right, the Romans were brutal and the physical abuse they inflicted was way over the top. What she saw was her gentle teacher, a ring of thorns embedded in his head, blood streaming down his face carrying a huge piece of timber toward that wretched hill just outside the city called, "The skull," and his back shredded by the lashes. Now he was on his way to be crucified, the utterly inhumane way Rome had of treating its enemies. From a distance she heard the sound of a hammer striking nails. Then, she saw him raised on the cross for six hours where he hung naked before the whole world, in unbelievable pain.

Then as suddenly as it started it was over. The crowd began to go home. As a stranger took the body away Mary and a few friends followed. The stranger placed Jesus in a small tomb, about a city block from the place of his death. She watched while soldiers came and rolled a stone in front of the tomb. Since it was almost sundown and the Jewish Sabbath was soon to begin, she went home. Like all other Jews, she neither traveled or left her home from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, for to do so was to break the law of God. When the Sabbath was over it was too dark to visit him.

The first opportunity to pay her respects was Sunday, the first day of the week. She went while it was still dark, anticipating the first rays of the sun. Even before she arrived she could tell that something was wrong. Things felt and looked different. Someone, something had moved the stone! Terrified, she ran to tell Peter. Peter and a friend sprinted to the tomb. By the time she arrived they were walking away, heads down, silent.

Mary stayed, tears flowing down her cheeks. She bent over and looked inside the tomb. She saw two men dressed in white. One of them spoke, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She couldn't tell them that she couldn't imagine living without the gentle teacher who had healed and transformed her. Instead she said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." Her grief, John suggests, was so great that not even angels could bring her comfort.

Turning she saw a man. It was nearly impossible to tell who it was, because her vision was blurred by the tears. Assuming it was the gardener, she said "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." It was Jesus, and all he said was, "Mary." It was the most beautiful word she had ever heard.

Do you remember West Side Story, the 60's musical version of Romeo and Juliet where a young man falls in love with a Spanish Mary, named Maria, and like they do in

musicals, began jumping over water hydrants and singing to street lights? "Maria. Maria, Maria, Maria." The name was everything, or as he sings, "the most beautiful sound I ever heard."

A four year old stands sobbing in a department store, lost. Suddenly an angel appears looking very much like his mother and says, "Paul." All the beautiful sounds in a single word. Homecoming. Hope. Joy!

In Walter Wangerin's wonderful fantasy, "The Book of the Dun Cow," Chanticleer, the Rooster, ministers to his flock, the occupants of the hen house, along with an assortment of animals such as John Wesley Wiesel and Nimbus, the Deer. One night the animals can hardly sleep knowing that war with their archrival, Cockatris, is imminent. At midnight, Chanticleer begins to crow Compline, the seventh and final holy hour of the day. Only this time Compline is almost void of any liturgical form. This time it consists purely of names. Wangerin writes, "...the Rooster gave his animals a blessing. One by one he sang their names with a prayer for the peace of each one. 'Nimbus, the peace of the Lord is with you. John Wesley Wiesel, the peace of the Lord is with you.' And one by one, peace came to them as they heard another call them by name. Dark was no longer so dark anymore."

The gospel is no cold commanding system or group of principles. It knows each of us by name, calls us by name, knocks on the door of each heart with an urgency and a tenderness born of God's deep knowledge of us. It begins at our Christian birth, our baptism, where we are washed, sealed, and named, and it continues to our death, where God calls us by name to enter into his peace.

"Mary." We are always on a first-name basis with Jesus. She responded, "Teacher!" Perhaps he could sense in her voice that she now thought that everything will be like it always was, that they could go back to the time when he was a teacher and she was a learner. "Teacher," she said, but that was his Friday name, and now it was Sunday, an entirely new day, and an entirely new life. Jesus was not on his way back to Mary and the disciples; he was on his way to God, and he was taking the whole world with him, which may be why all the other Gospel accounts of the resurrection tell us not to be afraid. Because new life is frightening...to look for a sealed tomb and find one filled with angels, to hunt for the past and discover the future, to seek a corpse and find the risen Lord--this is exciting, and frightening.

Jesus is taking Mary, and all of us, into uncharted territory. He is taking us into new areas of life, where the old is disappearing, and the new is exploding. Easter is not about the past, or holding on to the past. It is about the new. It is not about standing back and watching, but moving forward to new adventures equipped as Easter people.

The claim of Easter is not just that something has happened to Jesus, but that something is happening to all of us. After his death Jesus entered into a new existence, one in which he shared the power of God with others. What happened to Jesus, we believe, happens to his followers. Through the power of the Spirit, we who trust in him and believe in him, share in his resurrected life. We know about

this power from two sources the experiences of a community of people who met the risen Christ in the days following Easter and experiences of power through Jesus by generations of people across the centuries which continue to this very day.

Mary's experience was powerful, but not powerful enough to establish a church that would endure until the present. Had not thousands, no millions, of believers experienced and witnessed the same power the church could not have lasted two years, say nothing of 2,000 years. Christ longs to touch you with his resurrected life. He calls you by name and says, "Larry, Alice, Neal, enter into my life. Know my forgiveness, experience my love. Serve your sisters and brothers, empowered by my spirit."

This past week I read a long Facebook dialog between Pastor Matt Toso and several bright skeptics. He was telling the story of Jesus and of Easter, and they were sharing their sincere doubts. Somewhere in the middle of it he wrote, "2,000 years ago a man who was tortured and killed because he loved everyone for who they are, got out of a sealed tomb and walked around."

A young man responded, "No one gets killed for saying 'love each other.' That's silly." Is it silly, or is a better word, tragic? Either way, it is true. People do get killed for saying "Love one another" --people like Martin Luther King, Jr. People like Bishop Oscar Romero, or Stephen Biko, a black martyr in South Africa. People like the white students who went south during the Civil Rights marches of the 60's.

Pastor Toso summarizes a major portion of the message of Jesus with these words: Love one another. I can't improve on that. There is not much more that needs to be said than this, "God commented on the death of Jesus, and the message of Jesus by raising Jesus from death. By doing so he said, "The way of Jesus is my way. The words of Jesus are my words. Death is not the ending, death can be the gateway to a new way of life."

So, dear friends, follow Jesus. Walk with him. There is, however, one warning: None of us can hold Christ too tight. He warned Mary Magdalene not to hold on. He died not to create a new dependency, but a new freedom. None of us are asked to give up our brains, just our selfishness, and our pride. Each of us is invited to stand just far enough away so that his power may leap from his transformer to ours, and flow through us. When this happens each of us will know that Easter comes far more often than once a year, and like Mary Magdalene we will declare to all who will listen, "I have seen the Lord!" © 2011