

The Bethel Pulpit

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April 21, 2019 – Easter Sunday



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: **John 20:1-18**

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I preached about Judas on Good Friday. Each of the six of us, who preached at the Tre Ore service on that day, focused on a particular person who was somehow connected to the crucifixion. My connected person was Judas. As a result, I have found myself thinking about Judas quite a bit over the past week or so.

And I have to say, having Judas as a focal point this past week – this “Holy Week” leading up to Easter – is kind of an odd thing, but not necessarily a bad thing.

What strikes me about Judas is perhaps somewhat the same thing that strikes me about Simon Peter (the disciple who is second to the grave in this odd race to the empty tomb that we have today in our Gospel reading). Both of these disciples – both Judas and Simon Peter – are greatly flawed individuals, which makes them, at least to me, approachable and relatable.

Peter, for example, seems to say whatever he is on his mind and tends to jump right in before thinking.

And Judas (who was in charge of the money for Jesus and his disciples) comes across in the Gospels as if his first thought is always, “how much does it cost” and is one who gets consumed with money vs. ministry.

And both of these disciples, of course, turned away from Jesus in the last days of his earthly life.

I remember at a midweek chapel service years ago one of our former pastors – Pastor Katie Baardseth – preaching about Judas and Peter. She said that the only difference between Judas’ sin of betraying Jesus and Peter’s sin of denying knowing Jesus three times was that Peter allowed for the forgiveness of Jesus to take place, whereas Judas did not. Both sins – Judas’ sin of betrayal and Peter’s sin of denial – were devastating and obviously both impacted the relationship that each had with Jesus, but their individual responses differed, thus drastically affecting their futures.

Ultimately, Judas was so consumed with guilt that he did not trust that the power of forgiveness could be held out even for him, so he ended his life. Peter, on the other

hand, held on and he ultimately survived that great shame. We know Peter as The Rock (the original Rock) – the one entrusted by Jesus to establish his earthly church. We have the perspective of time to know what Simon Peter became.

So, we know Simon Peter – the Rock, but on that first Easter morning, before Mary Magdalene burst through the door with the news, “The stone has been moved! The tomb is empty!” (before that) I guarantee you Peter was not feeling like any rock. He may have felt like a handful of pebbles or dirt or maybe something even worse, but I am guessing that he did not feel like a mighty rock.

In fact, I wonder if Peter was feeling anything at all? I would think that at that moment all Peter felt was numb. That seems to be what most of us feel when we are facing a great loss – when we have lost someone near and dear to us. When my parents died, I remember feeling absolutely numb – and I felt that way having had the good fortune of being able to be in a good place with both of my parents before they died.

Peter had no such luck – not even close.

Peter had followed after Jesus when he had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was waiting outside the home of the high priest Caiaphas warming himself by a fire – hoping to see what might happen to his friend. It was there around that fire that Peter was asked about his connection to Jesus – not once, not twice, but three times. And that last time took place the moment that the soldiers were moving Jesus; so, as Peter’s words of denial were spewing from his mouth, Jesus, bound and headed for death, heard every word. And then a roster crowed.

Peter then remembered the words that Jesus had said earlier that night to Peter, “...this very night, before the roster crows, you will deny me three times.”

Numb seems reasonable to me. At least that is where I am going to put Peter the moments before Mary burst through the door. And afterwards? When Peter hears those hopeful but crazy words from Mary, he is out the door and headed for the tomb. The other disciple wins the race, but when Peter gets there he plows through and goes right into the tomb first. And then we read this,

“... (Peter) 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.”
As I read this I am left thinking that this other disciple – the fast one – saw the grave clothes folded up and the linen that was used to cover Jesus’ face neatly placed aside and assumed that if someone had removed the body, they would not have gone to all the trouble of stripping it first and they most likely would not have removed and rolled up the linen and put it in a place by itself. That thought apparently sparked the memory of Jesus’ earlier words about his death and resurrection – words that seemed to consistently fall on the deaf ears of all the disciples each and every time Jesus spoke about it during his time with them.

It does not seem that Simon Peter – the future Rock, but current pebble – is so moved. He saw the same evidence as the fast disciple, but no bells seemed to ring. So, the two disciples head home.

Leaving us with Mary – back in the garden outside of the tomb. After looking into the tomb and seeing two angels, Mary turns back to the garden and encounters Jesus, but does not recognize him; instead Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener. That changes when Jesus calls her by name. When she hears him say, “Mary” everything lines up and she too believes.

Three disciples. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything. One is surprised into believing by hearing the sound of her name.

In each of these disciples I think we find ourselves at one time or another in our lives. John could have written a less complicated story. “Mary Magdalene, Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. They saw the linen wrappings lying there and they believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. The End.”

But John does not do that. John leaves room for each of us – for the one who sees and believes, for another who sees and leaves uncertain, and for the one who needs to hear her own name before believing.

We know that our friend Simon Peter finally got it – that he had another chance. He finally did encounter the risen Jesus and he went on to be one of the main anchors of

the Early Christian Church.

But I have to wonder – even years after he had experienced the power of Jesus’ forgiveness – (I wonder) what Peter thought about and maybe even felt deep inside whenever he happened to hear a roster crow? Perhaps in a way we each have those painful reminders of our brokenness/our sinfulness – reminders of the ways that we have hurt others, done wrong, and caused harm. Forgiveness heals, but it can absolutely leave scars. We don’t like those scars – those reminders of what we have done and how we have messed up, but we have them.

But scars and all, we, like Peter, have another chance.

And that really is the good news of Easter. Not that with Jesus’ death and resurrection everything is peachy and perfect and that bunnies will be bouncing around delivering candy and eggs to everyone. The Good News of Easter is that because of God’s love perfectly revealed to us in the person, and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we have another chance – starting today. We can start over.

Today is a new day, because He is Risen! Amen.