

Whom Are You Looking For?
April 11, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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WHEW!

That was the noise coming from the church last week. In the weeks before, a team of Caldwell volunteers and staff had hosted a seven-week worship and lunch series, feeding 800 people and helping raise more than \$3,200 for two local non-profit agencies.

In those same weeks, the choir had sung at several events around town, in addition to every Sunday and several special worship services with us. Then, during Holy Week, the Worship Committee helped organize five worship services in eight days.

W-H-E-W. “Whew!”

One church volunteer looked back on how busy we have been and said she was glad we were back to Ordinary Time on the church calendar. I know how she feels. I didn’t have the heart to tell her, at least at that moment, that she wasn’t quite right.

Almost all of us have become familiar with the season of Lent, the 40 days of preparation leading up to Easter. But we may not be as aware that there is an even longer season that rolls out of the open tomb we discovered last Sunday. In some church traditions, it’s called Eastertide. It’s a time to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As God’s people, we move from the open tomb through Christ’s post-resurrection appearances to the Ascension to heaven and finally the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Over these next seven weeks, the secular world focuses on the early part of baseball season. School draws near to its close. The secular calendar gives us Earth Day and Mother’s Day and we’ll finalize our plans for summer. All of that is good. But it can tend to overshadow the true gift of this time of year, our chance to bask in the great good news of our Lord’s resurrection and victory over death. It is, one resource declares, the most festive period of the year. It’s a shame it tends to get lost in our busy-ness.

Here at Caldwell, our Adult Sunday School class will be doing its best to keep an Easter frame of mind. The class is studying a book that focuses on seven things Christ said after the resurrection and before his Ascension. The book is titled The Seven NEXT Words of Christ, modeled loosely after the tradition of studying Christ’s seven last words.

Because of that study – and more because Easter asks us to think and act differently – I’ll preach in parallel with the book through these weeks, focusing each week on one of Christ’s post-resurrection sayings.

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We heard today's focal passage in the Gospel of John. The passage begins with Mary Magdalene weeping at the news that Jesus' body is gone from the tomb. This fulfills Christ's words earlier in John, that those who love him would weep but that their tears would turn to joy.

Mary doesn't know it yet, but, at this point in the story, Christ's resurrection has already opened a new age – an age when nothing can be taken for granted and all things are possible, even resurrection. The angels she finds in the tomb ask her the most fundamental question possible: "Woman, why are you weeping." It is as if they understand that all things are possible. Perhaps angels live in that realm of hope and endless possibility all the time. But at that moment, Mary Magdalene, drenched in shock and grief, isn't anywhere near that realm.

Then Jesus repeats the same question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" followed by another question. "Whom are you looking for?"

Through her tear-filled eyes, she follows the voice to the face of someone who at first appears to be a stranger. She takes him to be the gardener. At this point, the closest readers of scripture might know to pause ... because, in the story of God, unusual things happen in gardens.

In those days, gardens were special places, oases in an otherwise dry and rocky land, surrounded by walls of stone or hedges and full of fruit trees, vegetables, spices and flowers. People met there for special occasions. In some cases, wealthy families acquired gardens where there were places in the rock, natural tombs where they could bury their family members. That was the case with Joseph of Arimathea, the affluent Pharisee who had encountered Christ once and, later, offered a tomb for Christ's burial. Sometimes the largest gardens required the employ of a gardener.

It all began a lot earlier in a different garden, of course, as we were reminded in our reading from Genesis. God created for Adam and Eve a place of lush surroundings and bountiful produce, set aside where humanity might live all of its days in peace and safety, surrounded by unimaginable beauty. In that place, the great reformer John Calvin said, "God made us rich before we were born." Every need was met. But God also gave Adam and Eve free will, the ability to follow God's will or not. Adam and Eve – and all of humanity -- fell from that place in sin and were cast from that garden, forever after in need of grace.

So, in that different garden, where Christ was buried, why does Mary Magdalene mistake Christ for the gardener? Perhaps, in one sense, it was no mistake at all. Perhaps, there, in a flash before Christ revealed himself as the messiah, he was to her what Christ is to all of us – the one who had come to clean up the mess that Adam, Eve and the rest of us had made of God's garden.

In the garden of Eden, women and men were given it all, then it was taken away. In the garden of Jesus' tomb, his believers thought they had lost it all and, then, they were given it all back and more.

In our sin, everything is ruined. In Christ's resurrection, everything is set right. Hope that could never have been imagined is born. Evidence of God's grace stands before us in flesh and blood, bearing the wounds of our sin. But, like Mary Magdalene, we take him for the gardener because, deep down inside, we know there was unfinished business in the garden.

I am the Alpha and Omega, said Jesus, the beginning and the end. In Adam, we fell. In Christ, we are resurrected.

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"Whom are you looking for?" Jesus asked Mary Magdalene.

This last week, two men whose families are going through a bit of a rough patch, had met at a local low-rate motel. Each was at a different place in life. Both needed a little time, a little luck and a paycheck or two to get through.

Both had come to Caldwell asking if we had any assistance funds, as happens here on a regular basis. Yes, I said, we're not a big church and don't have a lot of money but we try to help. We can help some, more if you able to help out with a few jobs around the church. Are you able, I asked? Yes, they both answered.

So they took up rake and shovel, lawn mower and weed trimmer and spent two days doing the kind of extra grounds work we need around here once or twice a year. They also worked in the garden. They cleared what was left of our winter plantings, pulled the weeds and grass that had crept in and prepared the dirt for the planting of our spring and summer vegetables this week.

With their modest earnings, they bought food and medicine for family members, and a few more nights stay in the hotel. At the end of the day Friday, they and their families were a few steps closer to where they want to be.

And as we identified the jobs to be done, as they tackled the work and completed each job, we shared the love of Christ. As we walked the grounds, we took in the hope that comes with spring and the promise of our garden. We felt the satisfaction of hard work well done. And we caught a glimpse of the grace of God.

For Caldwell church, these men gave us the opportunity to be the body of the risen Christ. They were who we were looking for, even before we knew to ask. In them, we saw the face of Christ, who said in as much as you have helped those in need, you have done it to me.

* * *

“Whom are you looking for?”

It’s a question worth asking in all sorts of other ways.

Take a moment and look around. Take in the names and faces of those you didn’t know one, two or three years ago but who have become important to you through the church. Ask yourself if you are doing what you can for each other as the body of Christ, especially those experiencing loss, suffering, loneliness, doubt or fear, those needing fellowship or just the presence and prayer of another believer. If that question nags at you, then come to the meeting today after church where we will explore how to deepen and widen our congregational care ministries.

“Whom are you looking for?”

Are there those with whom you have unfinished business, relationships in need of reconciliation in the name of the one who reconciled us to our creator?

Now think about our missions and justice ministries. Whom are we looking for in the diverse faces of the children at Merry Oaks Elementary School? When we keep homeless women and men in Room in the Inn and stretch ourselves to help host the women from the emergency shelter? When we help build affordable housing? When we serve meals alongside the students of the Community Culinary School of Charlotte, which helps the chronically underemployed find a new path?

Whose face do we see when we travel to Guatemala? When we bring food and money for the Loaves and Fishes hunger ministry? Whose face will we see as we get to know the children and families of the Central Avenue Bilingual Preschool?

Now, let us ask: Whom should we be looking for as we seek to grow as a diverse, inclusive, missional church? Are those faces just white? Are they just middle class? Or hasn’t God already challenged us and opened the door for us to be a truly multicultural church, open, welcoming and seeking to attract the full diversity of peoples who claim Christ as their savior?

Are we looking for them? Or simply opening our doors and hoping they show up?

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Whom are you looking for?

The question behind the question is: Who do we expect to find in our midst?

Do we see the world anew on this side of the cross? Are our hearts, souls and minds open to new revelation of how to be God’s people in ways we might not ever have imagined?

As we walk these 50 days of Eastertide – seeking anew to be the body of Christ, waiting for the fresh inspiration of the Holy Spirit – may we recognize and serve the risen Christ.

Amen.