

Is it true?
Easter Sunday
April 24, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Jeremiah 31:1-6
John 20:1-18

It started with a footrace in the dark.

Two grown men stumbling over the stony path and scrambling through the bushy garden before sun-up to get to the tomb. Mary of Magdala had reported that Jesus' body was missing. The men had to know. They had to see for themselves.

Is it true?

The same might be said for all of us this Easter morning 2011. Around the world, Christians woke up this morning and put on their nicest clothes and came to church to see for themselves: Is it true?

Of course, we come for all sorts of other reasons, reasons that we would have been more likely to cite if someone stopped us on the church steps and asked why we came.

We came because we love the spirit of worship on Easter morning. We came because we love to sing that first hymn, Jesus Christ is Risen Today. We came because we don't make it to church much – ok, not much at all, - but this *is* Easter. We came because we had family in town. We came to hear the old, old story that we have come to church to hear on Easter mornings since before we can remember. We came because we can't imagine being anywhere else on Easter morning.

But somewhere along the way, between the church bell chime that calls us to worship and the benediction, we just might think to ourselves: Is it true? The great theologian Karl Barth wrote that that question brings people to church every Sunday. But on Easter Sunday it is unmistakable, unavoidable. Is it true?

Another commentator points out the irony that, for many, the toughest questions of the Christian life come at us most directly on Easter Sunday. Across America, the pews are filled with folk who may not be in church that often. That's when, in our prayers and songs and sermons, we reach for the riskiest claims of all – that God came into the world in the person Jesus Christ; that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, the only sinless person ever; that his lessons and life painted the picture of the kingdom of heaven; that he willingly died for our sins; and, after three

days in the tomb, he was resurrected and ascended into heaven to become one with God the creator again.

Why, this writer asked, on this of all days, do we lift up to such heights these, the most complicated and, for some, the most challenging or even divisive issues of our faith? This, of all days, when so many may have come back to give religion another chance.

Most other Sundays, we come to hear and try to understand a single parable or Bible story, a gentle, ankle-deep dip into the waters of faith. That much we can handle on a Sunday morning. But on Easter morning, we take all comers up to the high dive and ask them to do a triple gainer with a half-twist: Is it true? Why not tackle an easier question on Easter, when the pews are packed with potential new members, and save the really tough topics for another day?

As for us at Caldwell, we tend to focus an awful lot on Sundays on what we can *do*. What action can we take? What justice issue needs our attention? What mission can we serve? We will do that later this morning when we commission our team that leaves this week for Guatemala. But that commissioning comes *after* we hear the word of our Lord read and interpreted, and there is a reason for that. We act as a response to what we believe. Which means, first, we must wrestle with what we believe.

On this Easter morning, the story of the first Easter according to the Gospel of John frames that question for us. Even before the sun is up, we run with Peter and the other disciple to find that Mary Magdalene is right. The tomb is empty. After we arrive, Mary has an encounter with a man whom she assumed was the gardener.

An empty tomb. A momentary, mysterious exchange with a man who didn't want to be touched. Partial evidence at best. We might like more to go on. But this is what we have. So, we ask, is it true?

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John's account of that first Easter morning gives us three perspectives through which we can weigh the evidence. Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, sprint to the scene. Mary Magdalene isn't far behind them. John reports that the beloved disciple gets there first, but doesn't go into the tomb. So our first picture of the inside of the tomb comes through Peter's eyes.

I bet we all have our own mental image of Peter. Jesus called him his "rock," which many attribute to what they assume was Peter's physical stature. He was a rugged fisherman who, before his calling, made his trade on the choppy waters of the Lake of Galilee. Maybe Peter was built like a middle linebacker. That might explain why the beloved disciple outran him.

But there is far more to Peter. One scholar describes Peter as a man of “boisterous and impetuous enthusiasm,” a man “of impulse and aggressive energy, of childlike simplicity and daring, alternating with a weak and cowardly instability.”¹ He would, of course, go on to great things - launching what we know as the Christian church. But that comes later.

On that first Easter morning, Peter charged headlong into the open tomb ahead of the beloved disciple. He found the linens in which Jesus’ body was wrapped lying there. The cloth that had been around Jesus’ head nearby, neatly rolled up.

For once, Peter was speechless. The man who so many times spoke without thinking first had nothing to say. We can think of all sorts of reasons. He may well have been stupefied. The idea of resurrection, of people being raised from the dead, wasn’t completely uncommon in his time and culture. But maybe he didn’t really think it would be true about Jesus.

Or maybe his tongue – and his heart – were still tightly bound by the guilt he felt for betraying Jesus, then lurking in the shadows as they brutally beat Jesus, made him carry the beam of his cross 1,000 feet, nailed him to it and watched him gasp desperately for breath for six hours before finally uttering, “It is finished.” The weight of that kind of guilt would be enough to humble and silence any of us for a very long time.

So the Gospel of John stops short of indicating what Peter thought that first Easter morning. His perspective, at that moment at least, seems to be one of unresolved ideas and feelings about what the open tomb meant.

Next we have the beloved disciple. John never gives us his name, but we have some clues. The term “the beloved disciple” appears only in John’s gospel and only four times is he mentioned, all during or following the Passion of Jesus, his last week on earth.

Two theories stand. John the disciple, son of Zebedee, fishing business partner to Andrew and Peter’s father, does not appear by name in the Gospel of John until the very end. Based on that, scholars have concluded the writer of the Fourth Gospel held the disciple John in high regard and gave him a special role in his account of Jesus’ life.

The second theory is that the beloved disciple is meant to represent a model of true discipleship to the audience for whom the Fourth Gospel was written. That audience was a group of followers of Christ under persecution about 50 years after Christ’s death. John was written to encourage them in their belief that Jesus was the messiah, the son of God.

However we may want to think of the beloved disciple, one thing is clear: he believed. When he got to the tomb first, he still didn’t go in. But he followed Peter. Once inside, he saw what Peter saw, only the linen cloths. Grave robbers would not have taken the time to remove the burial

¹ Both descriptions taken from *Who’s Who in the Bible*, Camay and Browning, p. 345

cloths. That was all the evidence the beloved disciple needed. “He saw and believed,” the gospel states with fitting brevity.

The beloved disciple believed mostly, though, because he already believed. Throughout the gospel of John, he represents the loyal love and intimacy with Jesus that the author of the Fourth gospel wants us all to embrace as the model of true discipleship. The gospel takes it even a step further. He adds that the beloved disciple did not fully understand the scripture that Jesus must be raised from the dead. The beloved disciple embodies the definition of faith that we find in the book of Hebrews, “faith is our handle on what we can’t see.”²

Our third perspective on the empty tomb comes from Mary Magdalene. So much has been speculated about the identity and character of this Mary that it’s hard to know exactly who she was. Three gospels agree that she was a woman from a town neighboring Galilee who gave financial and domestic support to Jesus and his disciples. Beyond that, her identity gets blurred by the stories of other Marys – the one whose demons were exorcized; the one whose act of penitence was to wipe Jesus’ feet clean with her tears and hair; and, the one who is the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

In John’s gospel, however, she is given a place of honor. She is the first to see the risen Lord and the first to proclaim his resurrection. She got to the tomb that morning after the men, perhaps because she suffered from epilepsy, rather than demons, as some scholars have speculated. When she got there, she saw the tomb empty and she had one thing on her mind. She had come for Jesus’ body in the first place and, now, even though it was not there, she was going to locate it.

For whatever reason, she did not come expecting resurrection. She didn’t even turn to resurrection as a way of explaining the body’s absence, at least initially. So when a man showed up, whom she assumed was the gardener, her question came almost as an order: “Tell me where you have put the body.”

That’s when Jesus called her by name, “Mary,” he said.

“Teacher,” she replied, and with uncontrolled enthusiasm, she reaches out for him.

Mary of Magdala came to the tomb that morning to find one thing, expecting one experience, bringing a mindset so totally focused on the material, the concrete, the solid evidence. She wanted to claim the body of the one whose life had been her inspiration. But she encountered something altogether different and unexpected, a revealed Jesus, a Lord she didn’t know by appearance but who knew her by name, a God she couldn’t get her arms around but in whom she believed because the man manifested a God who knew her. After that, hard evidence, thinking that was purely logical, expectation that was purely rational didn’t matter that much.

² The Message, Hebrews 11:

She had found her Lord, revealed to her in a gardener, and she gave what some have called the first Easter sermon, proclaiming, "He is risen."

* * *

Is it true?

In a sense, aren't we all running in the dark, looking for the truth?

We all must run to the empty tomb and, in our own way, look in for ourselves. We all arrive with varied expectations, individual experiences, personal ways of understanding what we find, different needs and ways of interpreting the one we call God.

Like Peter, we may be at a place where we really don't know what to think, but we come to see and do our best and we bring our own emotional, intellectual, spiritual and experiential framework. Maybe, like Peter, we do understand but we just keep it to ourselves for the moment.

Or like the beloved disciple, maybe we arrive believing. We don't have to see to believe. That leap of faith comes easily and lightly, as a gift from outside ourselves. We don't have to understand it all to believe. We know God is bigger than that, far, far bigger than whatever humble capacity for understanding we bring to the tomb. So we believe without having to see.

Or, finally, as with Mary Magdalene, maybe we arrive at the tomb expecting one thing but leaving with something we could never have imagined. We came out of habit or protocol. It's the thing to do. We expected to find a lifeless body. We're not even sure what to do with our own life, which may feel as lifeless as that body we are expecting to find. That's just the way of this broken, tired, predictable world.

But with Mary we encounter the revealed Jesus in the face of a stranger. We experience a God who knows us by name and who speaks to us tenderly, who reassures us that we are never out of God's sight or care. And we are given new life.

Is it true? In the end, that is a question each of us must decide for ourselves. But if we come with a humble and open heart, not just on Easter Sunday, but every Sunday (ok, almost every Sunday), if we risk letting go of our limited grasp and trust in something that is more than we can see, then the God who chose us in Jesus Christ will be revealed.

And as with all three who ran to the tomb that morning, we will be given new life. And isn't that what we are really looking for?

See you next Sunday.

In the name of our risen Lord and savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.