

Sermon 4-21-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Engaging in Easter

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. In John's portrait, Magdalene comes alone. Matthew shares that "the other Mary" comes along. Mark names Solome. Luke adds "Joanna and the other women". No matter the number or names, every Gospel proclaims that Jesus appears first to his female followers. I love that Belmont's 1930 stained glass Easter scene contains no men! Jesus and the angels will ordain Magdalene, Mary, Solome, and Joanna as Christianity's first preachers. Perhaps, we might commission a new stained glass window: The Apostolic Women Preach "Christ Is Risen" to the Still Sleepy Disciples. Indeed, if Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, the other James, the other Simon, and Saul of Tarsus are named as apostles, surely Mary, Magdalene, Solome, and Joanna deserve that title. You that have ears to hear, listen: the church accepted the Easter message but rejected female messengers. We Methodists only granted full clergy rights to women in 1956. In a Birmingham jail, Rev. King preached, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers with God."

The synoptics speak of a group of women, while John's Magdalene comes alone. Literalism literally trips up right there, but our faith runs deeper and wider than words on the page. The Canonical Committee trusted that Jesus still appears and appreciated the different perspectives within the four Gospels.

John shows Magdalene coming alone to the tomb. Does not our grief isolate us even in the presence of others? She had lost Jesus who helped her find her life. She witnessed love crucified. She stood with Jesus' mother at the cross. She saw the disciples scatter. The crowds' cruel tweets echoed through her head. She recalled the priests' pompous smirks. Perhaps, she heard that Judas added to their grief by taking his own life. Grief isolates us. But, even when we feel like the only one, we do not come to the tomb alone. Early in the morning, while it is still dark, the predawn silence is broken by the breeze moving the pine needles and dogwood leaves. Hours before the sun rises, the warblers, blackbirds, and robins lift their morning songs. Creation, itself, groans in labor pains with us, awaiting the birth of God's hope. (Romans 8)

When Magdalene arrives at the cemetery, the mausoleum's 1,000 pound stone door is ajar, opened, out of its groove, toppled over, and rolled away. In Matthew, the earth quaked as a team of angels rolled back the grave door, flipped it on its side, sat down on it, and just beamed glorious heavenly light. In our text, Magdalene sees no angels. She sees the crypt door ajar and fears a deeper insult... the desecration of Jesus' grave. She assumes "they have taken Jesus' body away from her".

Unable to look inside, she runs back to the disciples. We love to point out Peter's stumbles, but Peter and John are the kind of faith family that get out of bed at 4:30 am to run across town with you. The church is full of people like that: maybe slow to believe, yes-sinful, yes- misunderstanding, but ready to bring over a casserole, clean up a mess, or get your ox or car out of the ditch. Disciples stand with you when it seems the world is falling apart.

I imagine Magdalene woke Peter to say, "They have taken my Lord away." Who are the "they"? Who are "they" in your life? They did this. They made us lock the doors. It was great before they came. They did that. Friends, do we let "them" take Jesus away? A lot of bad theology begins with "they"...

Peter and John race to the tomb. Did Magdalene beat them both? Magdalene and John wait outside the tomb for Peter, who runs right past their hesitation into the crypt. Peter and John see that Jesus' body is gone. But no angels greet them. However, the linen shroud that covered the crucified Lord remains. Did the risen Lord neatly fold the bloody sheets and lay them triumphantly aside? John records that he "as the beloved disciple" saw "and believed" something. Hear John's line about himself: "I saw and believed. Still, we didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead." Easter is not just a matter of theology and history. Easter unfolds as holy mystery. Faith blooms in "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding". (Philippians 4) Easter is an "unsearchable" mystery wherein "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge fills us with the fullness of God". (Ephesians 3) "For, we only know in part... but faith, hope, and love endure forever." (1 Corinthians 13)

Peter and John leave to get coffee. Mary stands alone again. She weeps. She turns toward her grief and looks into the tomb; she sees two angels. One sits where Jesus' head had laid, the second angel glows at Christ's footmarks. The angels ask her, "Why are you crying?" Are these the second string angels? She replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." Mary turns away from the angels. Let that soak in. Magdalene turns away from the shimmering angelic light! Perhaps she found no comfort in their question, or it seemed a rebuke, or maybe the question ran too deeply into her soul.

Turning away, she sees Jesus standing right next to her, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Now Jesus asks, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking Jesus was the gardener, Magdalene replies, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." Hearing Jesus call her name changes everything. Her heavy chains fall off, her heart grows free, she rises up, she will persist, she will preach. The apostle Magdalene preaches Easter's first sermon: "I have seen the Lord." No one can take Jesus away.

On that Easter evening, the disciples lock the doors in fear that "they" might come. But instead of "them"- Jesus comes. Jesus comes standing in our midst preaching, "Peace be with you." Jesus shows us the marks of what "they" did. See from Jesus' head, hands, and feet- sorrow and love flow mingled down. Love heals the marks "we" made! So, somehow the deepest, almost unbelievable joy fills our hearts. Such deep joy flows from the holy. Faith, hope and love bubble up within our souls, nourishing us into eternal life.

John's Easter telling is pretty modest. Jesus resists the Tempter's tired scheme of flying up to the temple's top spire and throwing himself down, gliding down on angel wings to the swooning Easter masses below. Jesus will not part the sky and make Pilate or Ananias stick their stained fingers into "their" nail marks. Love simply wins.

In the midst the celebration, Jesus shifts gears: "Peace upon you, as God sent me, so I am sending you." Then Jesus does the strangest thing: Jesus breathes on them. Jesus breathes life into us saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven." When we lock the doors in fear of "them," Jesus comes through our walls to break down the barriers. Breaking our isolation, God's Love sends us out to call others into holy feast. Jesus longs to resuscitate God's love within us and our neighbors. The particular word for "breath" shows up in Genesis as God animates a lump of clay into a human being and in Ezekiel as God's word revives a wilderness of dry, scattered, disjointed bones. Jesus calls us to exhale the toxic deadening air of "they"... "they have taken my lord away." "They" made us lock these doors... Exhale the "they" and breathe in Easter's forgiveness.

Jesus breathes forgiveness. Easter's theme is forgiveness. I have seen forgiveness breathe new life into my dry, weary, angry or wounded soul. At times, the

haters in life or on facebook, harm us; unfollow them, and repeat the mantra of Jesus' cross: "Oh God forgive them, (oh Jesus, forgive me), they just don't quite get it... yet." Forgiving is our mission. Jesus' church is characterized by an easy way of forgiving. If we see Jesus, we seek to forgive. No "they" can take Jesus away.

Did you notice that Jesus did not even bother to formally forgive Peter. It goes unsaid. Jesus just sends us out to forgive, not mentioning our betrayal, denial, and lying. So let us leave the judgement to God and allow God to animate us back to life. Oh, yes, we must oppose unjust systems, oppressive theology, and evil actions, but let us do so with hearts being renewed by divine love. Let us overcome evil with good. (Romans 12) Without forgiveness, we dry up into pile of disjointed baked bones. Exhale toxic blaming. Let go of Judas, Pilate, the priests, the crowd, and all of "them". Breathe in Easter. "They" can't take Jesus away. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed, for I have seen Jesus, strangely warming up broken hearts. Amen.