

Sermon, Easter, April 17, 2022

John 20:11-18

“I Have Seen The Lord”

In this morning's reading we find Mary Magdalene standing at the tomb in which Jesus' body had been laid, and weeping. First, who was this woman? Throughout much of the church's history she has been portrayed as a prostitute, but there is nothing in the scriptures that makes that claim. The eighth chapter of Luke says that she was a woman possessed by seven evil spirits, who had been healed by Jesus. She obviously became a devout follower of Jesus, and in the end, she is one of the few of his disciples who were brave enough to stand at the cross when he was executed. In fact, Matthew tells us that there were many women present at the crucifixion, and John appears to be the only male apostle to do so. An interesting fact when you consider that throughout Christian history women have been relegated to a secondary position in the church!

So, she has come to the tomb and peering in she sees two angels inside, who ask her why she is weeping, and she replies, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” The scripture does not say who ‘they’ are, that she is referring to. She then turns around and sees a man who she assumes is the gardener. This brings me to a detail from the story that might go overlooked.

In chapter 19 of John, it says that Jesus was crucified in a place called Golgotha, which in Hebrew means, The Place of the Skull; and, so often, paintings of the crucifixion show the cross in a barren looking place, with a skull at the base of the cross. But listen to what John writes at the end of the chapter. It says, “Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden, there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid”. So, the place where he died and where he was buried were close to one another - in a garden, and Mary assumes that the man standing outside the tomb is the gardener but is actually Jesus.

There is some subtle symbolism going on here. Remember that in chapter 12 of John, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In other words, when a seed falls to the ground, or is planted, it dies in its form as a seed, and from its death arises New Life, in the form of plants and fruit. To say that Jesus dies in a garden, and is buried in the same garden, is to say that he is the grain of wheat he referred to, and from his dying there arises New Life. In the Book of Genesis, Adam first comes to life in the Garden of Eden, and now, Jesus, whom the early church sometimes referred to as Second Adam, is resurrected, rising up to New Life - the New Life we are invited to receive through faith in Him. And may I also point out that it is most appropriate that Mary Magdalene is the first to declare, “I have seen the Lord!”, in the she was someone who experienced the New Life through her first contact with Jesus.

And so, this morning we celebrate that remarkable day when that which had been discarded by the world rose again in a new form that would shake the foundation of world history and offer to the world itself the possibility of becoming something other than what it has often shown itself to be. But beyond the arguments concerning the mechanics of the resurrection, what is its underlying purpose? What does it mean to those who proclaim its mystery, and turn to the one that God brought back to New Life - who God exalted as His Son, and a Savior for the lost, the wounded and downtrodden?

Well, I believe that there is probably more than one single meaning behind it all. Certainly, the means to salvation being one - salvation being our way of reuniting with what Tillich called "the Ground of Our Being" - perhaps a flash of cerebral light revealing new truths, taking away a fear of what lies beyond our final breath, as well as a healing for our broken and sinful souls.

But I also believe that it has something to do with an affirmation of that which the person, Jesus of Nazareth had said and done. At the cross we find the things that are wrong with the world asserting their selves - greed, the lust for power, the drive to crush and put asunder those who dare to be different, the love of violent solutions. But Jesus brought into the world a different Way - a means to confront acquisitive desire with generosity, to counter despair with hope, doubtfulness with faith, lies with truth, and to displace the false aspirations of hate with the spirit and power of love. With the stone rolled away and the Crucified One raised in bright glory all that he stood for is affirmed, opening for all the doorway to New Life! Amen.

Let us pray: God of ceaseless new beginnings, we rejoice that through your powerful love Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. In the resurrection you have shown that neither trouble nor persecution, hardship nor poverty, danger nor death can separate us from your love. Free us to trust you that we may live in confidence as your children.

With the resurrection you were victorious over sin, violence, and oppression. Free us to risk ourselves in the struggle for justice and peace that we may be your partners in restoring all of creation to your will.

In the resurrection you have opened the gates of eternal life. Free us from the fear of death that we may serve you with courage. In the resurrection you bring new possibilities out of hopeless situations. Free us from all despair that we may bring your hope to those who have lost heart.

Through the presence of Jesus Christ among us, draw us into a community of freedom, hope, and love. Work your new creation, indeed your offer of New Life, among us that we may glorify your Holy Name through all that we say and do!