

Sermon, 23 March 2008—Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The strangest aspect of the Resurrection story as John tells it in his Gospel is this: there is no announcement at the tomb by two angels as in Luke, or by one angel as in Matthew, or even by one young man dressed in white linen as in Mark. The other three Gospels all build their Resurrection accounts around the announcement with which the angels greet the women when they reach the tomb. John, however, offers nothing but silence and emptiness at first, such silence and such emptiness that Mary Magdalene sees only that the tomb has been raided and the corpse removed. Her anguish over this causes her to run for Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, who return with her to try to make sense of what she found. But it is strange that all three of Jesus' disciples in this story are left to struggle on their own with what this disconcerting event means. By the time an announcement is finally made, the Risen Christ is already recognized and adored.

Now remember, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the person or persons, angelic or human, sitting in the empty tomb specifically tells the women that Jesus is not there, but risen, and that they are to go to his disciples and to give them this message. This is the model of the message, and this is the core of every Christian proclamation. This is the first thing, and I will be bold to say the only thing, that as Christians we have to announce and to celebrate. Remember, "angel" is a Greek word that means "messenger." Maybe you think you are able to pull off being an angel in the sugarcoated Victorian version of the word; that is optional. But if you are a Christian, the Gospel requires you to be an angel in the original Greek sense of the

word. You have an announcement to make. Everything else flows from this fact; everything else only makes sense in its light. Our restoration, our forgiveness, our hope, our love, our joy—all of these are possible for us only because Jesus Christ is risen today. That is how his ministry can continue. That is the personal name of the actual power that reconciles us to God.

So it is very strange that in John's account, this life-changing announcement is absent. Instead, three of Jesus' disciples stare into the empty tomb and come to their own conclusions. In doing so, they depict for us the variety of conviction when confronted with the Resurrection.

Simon Peter enters the tomb first. The last time we saw this man in this Gospel, he was huddled with hostile strangers around a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest's house. It had already been a rough night. Peter had been in a scuffle in Gethsemane, incompetently defending Jesus; he had pulled out his knife and slashed the high priest's slave, cutting his ear off. Then, insanely, he had followed the detachment of soldiers hustling Jesus along to the high priest's house. There, seated in the darkness, he was thought to be recognized by several of those with him, even a relative of the man Peter had attacked; they all claimed to recognize him as a follower of Jesus. Out of his mind with distress and panic, Peter denies knowing Jesus, then denies knowing him again, and then denies knowing him a third time. After that, we do not see him again until this moment.

So it is not surprising that he can make nothing of this empty tomb. How hard it is, dear friends, how hard it is for you to see what is here, once you've turned your back! Resentment compounds quickly. It does not take long to move from my disappointment with you to my frustration with myself. If our relationship hasn't worked, the easiest way for me to deal with my shame is to blame you. This is precisely how we treat God. God is

a subtle and exasperating lover, who withdraws so we might follow, who hides so we might seek, who lets us go so we might learn to stand. Nearly always, the rejecting in that relationship is done by us, angry and frightened that our ways are not God's ways, that God will not act as we think right, that God will not comfort or control his followers as we think best. Feeling ourselves abandoned, hurt, resentful, we announce that our denials of any knowledge of God are God's fault, not ours. God betrayed us! It is as if darker and darker lenses keep dropping in front of our eyes. Of course, when the moment comes that we peer into the tomb, where light is scarce, we see no more than we would see squinting into a dark barn, where a homeless and unwed mother huddles with her newborn in the straw.

Peter will be restored. Only John's Gospel shows Jesus going out of his way later to be reconciled with the man who denied him. Jesus will ask Peter three times if he in fact loves him. Even then, Peter will try to evade such direct questions. But that really is all God wants to know: do you love me? However, until that wrenching encounter, Peter is too entangled in his shame and his denial to make any sense out of the emptiness of God. He doesn't get it, and after spending some time in what seems an empty room to him, with some oddly folded cloth, he goes home.

John underscores Peter's shortfall by pointing out that the disciple Jesus loved *does* believe. This man enters the tomb also, and when he sees the grave clothes folded, what unfolds in him is an affirmation. He has no doubt that God has acted.

Now, believing is this Gospel's goal. John tells us that he wrote his book so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The response of the beloved disciple, then, is not a personal conjecture: he doesn't believe some personal theory about what happened to Jesus' body.

Instead, he trusts integrally what before he relied on emotionally. He sees that God has acted. This wondrous dangerous man, Jesus, who had come to bear witness to the truth and who had been exterminated for that witness, has been raised back to life as a vindication of that truth. This incarnate deity, the Eternal Word, who had given sight to the blind and life to the dead, could not remain dead himself. So the disciple Jesus loved sees the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes, and then, without labor or travail, gives birth in himself to faith.

We might think this a summit worth reaching, but John wants us to understand that there is more to Christian faith than this. He adds the cryptic comment that “as yet, they did not understand Scripture, that he *must* rise from the dead.” So here, of course, he is showing us another type of reaction to the Resurrection that falls short: belief without foundation, belief on impulse, belief reliant on enthusiasm, belief as abject surrender to God’s inscrutable will. The danger is that this sets God up to be arbitrary and singular, our inscrutable parent, whom we approach at our own risk. The graces shown in Jesus are particular to him; the actions of God are free and unaccountable. God demonstrates sovereign power by overturning the natural order, by intervening in the course of human life, by showering favors on his favorites. Surrender to that, of course, can be called belief, but it somehow falls short of understanding. The intellect has been surrendered, not engaged.

For John, the fullness of belief is to see the greater comprehensiveness of the pattern of God’s activity, as it is first shown to us in Scripture. In the presence of the Divine Word, who made all things and who enlightens everyone, more is still possible for us than cheerful acclamation, and knowledge of God’s Word, according to John, is the second step available to

those whose belief is all emotional effusion. Scripture, the writer of this Gospel reminds us, is there to demonstrate that God's actions are consistent, that there is a way to know God's will, that we can trust God's intentions to hold over time and even to guide us in our own life.

Why does this matter? It has to do with the maturity of the believer. To a child who cannot read, every story is astonishing and every story is dependent on the storyteller. To a child who *can* read, every story is accessible and the discovery of the wonder of every story lies in the hands of the reader. Mature faith is informed faith and critical faith. It is able to see, not only God's action, which leaves us dependent on God, but also God's intention, which calls us into partnership with God. Then, when we imitate what we know of God, we will not be those who interrupt the lives of others for their own good, but those who find themselves as participants in carrying out the purposes of God revealed from the foundation of the world. God's purposes are revealed in this: the Word became incarnate so that God can draw all things to himself, and that God sent his Son, not to condemn the world, but to give it abundant life.

So Peter arrives with a wounded heart, and the disciple Jesus loves with a drowsy mind, but the third of these witnesses is the only one with spiritual eyes. Those angels the other evangelists mention, and which neither of the two other disciples see, are finally seen as present when Mary looks into the tomb. They are seated, one where Jesus' head had been and the other where his feet had been. They are arranged, in other words, as the seraphim over the Ark of the Covenant, framing the Mercy Seat, where the unseen and unnamable God is enthroned to bestow loving-kindness. Mary is too distressed to recognize the significance of their positions. Normally, when angels are sent to human beings, their first words are reassurance: "do

not be afraid,” they say. But John presents these angels not as messengers, but as sentinels; they both seem somewhat indifferent, remote, cool. Their only words are to ask Mary why she is weeping. Perhaps they are so removed from human concerns that they cannot figure out what all the fuss is about; or perhaps they understand that human distress arises from our limitations, which they do not share. Like Moses, before whom the glory of the LORD passed on Sinai, like Isaiah, who saw the Temple filled with the smoke of God and heard the seraphim roaring praise in such thunder that the pillars of the Temple shook, they have no message for the human being that enters their presence, but they are willing to be seen as all of God that can be seen. Mary has glimpsed the structure of God’s glory, the now empty space where humanity and divinity met in one person, which the angels protect, but she has glimpsed it without recognition.

Of course, John is using the irony of which he is such a master. John knows that we and the angels know something Mary doesn’t know—that there is no cause to weep. From now on there is only cause to rejoice. The angels do not ask her why she is weeping to find out the answer; they ask her that to call her weeping into question. To make that point, Jesus repeats their question—“why are you weeping?”—and he adds the question that echoes his very first words in this Gospel: “whom are you looking for?” Remember, when some of John the Baptizer’s followers trailed behind Jesus, he turned and asked them, “What are you looking for?” If they were willing to be active in the search for the answer to that question, then, by virtue of that commitment, they could become his disciples; so they did.

More significantly, Jesus’ second question to Mary also repeats another previous question. When the soldiers and police arrived in that other garden on Thursday night to arrest him and to drag him away to his trial and

death, Jesus asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” It is tempting to wonder what would have happened if Mary had answered as they did, giving that simple and direct answer. If she had named him as what she was looking for, would she have seen him standing before her? Instead, she misconstrues it all; she supposes him to be the gardener, and she imagines that in an unmotivated intervention he has removed the body, and she unrealistically proposes retrieving it herself—not unlike the good and worthy projects conjured up by many an anxious Christian eager to do the right thing in order to distract and silence the nagging godlet within. No wonder Jesus stops her by calling out her name.

Recognition is the point. Four days earlier, when the soldiers and police said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus answered, simply, in the Greek, “I am”—the name of God—and the soldiers and police fell to the ground. This recognition is what Mary cannot yet see, and since she does not use the name of Jesus, so that he can reveal himself as God to her, Jesus uses hers. This road of recognition is a two-way street. At that point, she does see him, and she calls him “Rabbouni.” This word, related to the word “rabbi,” does mean “teacher,” but it is the title given when the teacher is God. She has seen, and has seen truly. If the Risen One is to be present to us at all in our day, it is only because Christ has been lifted up into the Godhead, from where the Risen Lord can draw all things up into divinity.

So finally, the announcement comes. Jesus himself makes it. “Tell my brothers,” he says—and we should stop there first, because this *is* what the Resurrection has accomplished. We are now, as Jesus is, the children of God. As Jesus rose to fill all things, then his filling us and lifting us are part of that fulfillment. As our dear older brother Paul says over and over, “we know we have the Spirit of Christ in us”—which in his unbound risen form

it is his purpose to give us—“because we call God what Jesus called God: the most tender name you can call a parent, Abba, Amma.” At his last meal with his followers, Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants, but now I call you friends, since I have told you everything.” But on the other side of Resurrection, there was still a deeper intimacy to come; we were to become Jesus’ brothers and sisters in divinity as he had been ours in humanity.

That means that he now sees God as we see God and that God now sees us as God sees him. So Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, “Tell my brothers and sisters, ‘I am going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” That is the Easter announcement in this Gospel. The fusion of humanity and divinity in Christ is irrevocable and complete.

So, when we stare into what we do not comprehend, trembling before the abyss of divinity, there is a human person now who stands next to us, who also calls that mystery God because he is one with us, but who knows it to its depths, because he is God. Also, when we find ourselves under the penetrating gaze that pierces our shallowness to its shabby floor, trembling before the presence of divinity, there is a divine person who stands next to us, who empowers us to call God “Abba,” because he shares God’s divine nature, but who knows us to our depths, because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us as one of us. Christ became like us in order to make us like him, so that we are seen and known and beloved in Christ by the One who gave birth to us all, and so that God is seen and trusted and beloved in Christ by those he calls by name. For this reason, there is no glory that is not reflected from this glory, no gratitude that is not the overflowing of this gratitude, and no joy arising from any other source than the joy of the life we share with the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, whom we praise this day and hope to praise for all eternity.