

“WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR”

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
(20:1-18) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON
APRIL 4, 2021---EASTER SUNDAY**

WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

**THIS IS THE QUESTION AT THE HEART OF THIS
MORNING’S GOSPEL PASSAGE, A PASSAGE
THAT RECOUNTS THE CENTRAL MYSTERY AT
THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN FAITH..... IN OTHER
YEARS AND WE WOULD HAVE ALREADY
PROCLAIMED IT IN SONG: “CHRIST THE LORD IS
RISEN TODAY, ALLELUIA!”**

**WE PROCLAIM IT BY WHAT WE'RE WEARING,
EVEN WHAT WE'LL EAT LATER ON.....WE
PROCLAIM IT THROUGH THE FAMILY AND
FRIENDS THAT WE WILL SHARE THIS DAY
WITH.....**

CHRIST IS RISEN! THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED,

ALLELUIA!

**FOR US, THE OUTCOME IS KNOWN, IT'S A GIVEN.
BUT FOR THE PEOPLE WHOSE STORIES WE WILL
FOLLOW FOR WHAT MAY AMOUNT TO NO MORE
THAN AN HOUR IN A DAY ALMOST TWO
THOUSAND YEARS AGO, IT IS AN EVENT VEILED
IN MYSTERY.**

**A MAN, WHOM MARY MAGDALENE SUPPOSES TO
BE THE GARDENER, ASKS THE WEEPING
WOMAN, “WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”**

**BUT REALLY, THE MORE APPROPRIATE
QUESTION FOR MARY MIGHT HAVE BEEN,
“*WHAT* ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” BECAUSE, IN
TRUTH, SHE IS LOOKING, NOT FOR A PERSON,
OR EVEN FOR HER LORD. SHE IS LOOKING FOR A
BODY. SHE IS LOOKING FOR A TOMB.**

**IT IS THE THIRD DAY SINCE JESUS WAS
CRUCIFIED, EXECUTED IN AN ACT SO HORRIBLE
AND VILE AND VIOLENT THAT IT HAS STUNNED
AND WEIGHED HEAVILY UPON OUR
CONSCIOUSNESS FOR HUNDREDS AND
HUNDREDS OF YEARS.....**

**YES ---- JESUS DIED A PAINFUL DEATH, HATED
AND FEARED BY BOTH THE RELIGIOUS AND
POLITICAL AUTHORITIES OF HIS DAY. WE CAN
LOOK THROUGH THE GOSPELS AND WONDER
WHY HE WAS SO FEARED AND SO HATED. THE
GOSPEL OF JOHN TELLS US THAT JESUS
PERFORMED SIGNS THAT REVEALED THAT GOD
WAS AT WORK IN HIM:**

HE CHANGED WATER INTO WINE. HE HEALED A MAN BORN BLIND. HE FED MORE THAN FIVE THOUSAND HUNGRY PEOPLE WITH JUST FIVE BARLEY LOAVES AND TWO FISH. HE RAISED HIS BELOVED FRIEND LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD. THE GOSPEL ALSO TELLS US THAT JESUS BROKE THROUGH BARRIERS THAT WERE CONSIDERED UNBREAKABLE: HE SPOKE TO WOMEN AND FOREIGNERS AS THOUGH THEY WERE EQUALS. HE HEALED ON THE SABBATH, WHEN SUCH ACTIONS WERE CONSIDERED WORK, AND THEREFORE FORBIDDEN. BECAUSE HE DESCRIBED HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD WITH SUCH INTIMACY, HE BROKE THE ULTIMATE RELIGIOUS TABOOS.

AND BECAUSE HE BROKE DOWN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS, HE BROKE THE ULTIMATE POLITICAL TABOOS.

AND SO HE WAS KILLED.

THEN HIS BODY WAS PREPARED IN THE CUSTOMARY WAY FOR BURIAL, AND WAS PLACED IN A BORROWED TOMB..... A STONE ROUGHLY THE WEIGHT OF A MID-SIZED CAR WAS PLACED IN FRONT OF IT..... AT SUNDOWN SABBATH BEGAN, AND SO THE TOMB LAY QUIETLY UNDISTURBED BECAUSE THE SABBATH PROHIBITED UNNECESSARY TRAVEL AND WORK.

AND THAT, AS THEY SAY, WAS THAT. OR, WAS SUPPOSED TO BE.

BUT WE KNOW THAT “THAT” WAS NOT “THAT.”

WE READ THE WHOLE STORY THROUGH THE LENS OF RESURRECTION, AND SO WE’RE READY FOR WHAT HAPPENS NEXT. EARLY ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, SUNDAY MORNING, MARY MAGDALENE COMES TO THE TOMB. THERE ARE LOTS OF MARYS IN THE STORIES OF JESUS’ LIFE, SO IT’S GOOD TO DO A LITTLE CLARIFICATION AS TO WHO THIS PARTICULAR MARY IS.

SHE IS NOT JESUS' MOTHER, AND SHE IS NOT A PROSTITUTE..... SHE IS NOT THE WOMAN "TAKEN IN ADULTERY." -----SHE IS NOT ONE OF THE WOMEN WHO ANOINTED JESUS WITH PERFUME..... SHE IS, HOWEVER, ONE OF THE WOMEN WHO STOOD NEAR THE CROSS, ALONG WITH JESUS' MOTHER AND YET ANOTHER MARY. AND SHE IS HERE, AT THE TOMB, EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK.

NOW, WE ARE NOT GIVEN ANY PARTICULAR REASON FOR MARY TO BE AT THE TOMB. JESUS' BODY HAS ALREADY BEEN PROPERLY PREPARED FOR BURIAL, SO THAT'S NOT IT. WE CAN ONLY WONDER, WE CAN ONLY GUESS.

**BUT MAYBE ----JUST MAYBE -----MARY WANTS TO
BE NEAR HIM..... SHE IS MOURNING.**

**WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR? WHAT ARE YOU
LOOKING FOR? MARY MAGDALENE COMES,
LOOKING FOR A TOMB, BEHIND WHOSE
IMPOSSIBLY LARGE ENTRANCE-BLOCKING
STONE LIES THE DEAD BODY OF JESUS.**

**BUT MARY, TO HER SHOCK, FINDS THAT THE
STONE HAS BEEN REMOVED, AND THE TOMB IS
OPEN..... AND HER REACTION IS TO RUN AWAY.**

**SHE RUNS TO FIND TWO OF JESUS' DISCIPLES,
WHICH IS ANOTHER WORD FOR "LEARNERS."
MARY SEEKS THE OTHER DISCIPLES BECAUSE
ALL SHE CAN DO IN THE FACE OF NOT FINDING
WHAT SHE EXPECTED TO FIND IS TO RUN.**

**THESE OTHER DISCIPLES ARE PETER AND THE
UNNAMED "ONE WHOM JESUS LOVED." -----**

**THE GOSPELS DESCRIBE PETER TO US AS
SOMEONE WHO WAS SORT OF A SLOW STARTER
WHEN IT CAME TO LEARNING BUT WHO
EVENTUALLY MADE UP FOR THAT BY BECOMING
ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LEADERS OF THE
EARLY CHURCH.**

HE GETS IT, AND HE DOESN'T GET IT. THE BELOVED DISCIPLE, THE BELOVED LEARNER, IS MUCH MORE OF A MYSTERY. HIS IDENTITY HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF INTENSE SPECULATION, PRETTY MUCH SINCE THE EVANGELIST PUT DOWN HIS REED-PEN AND ROLLED UP HIS PAPYRUS. THE CLASSIC THEORY IS THAT HE IS JOHN, FOR WHOM THE GOSPEL IS NAMED. OTHERS HAVE MORE RECENTLY PROPOSED THAT MARY MAGDALENE IS, HERSELF, THE BELOVED DISCIPLE, WHICH DOESN'T MAKE A LOT OF SENSE, SINCE THIS CHAPTER PORTRAYS HER AS RUNNING TO GET THAT PERSON. STILL OTHERS BELIEVE IT MAY HAVE BEEN LAZARUS, WHOM JESUS RAISED FROM THE DEAD—

**LAZARUS, ABOUT WHOM A DISCIPLE SAYS TO
JESUS, “THE ONE WHOM YOU LOVE IS ILL.”**

**WHO IS THE BELOVED DISCIPLE? WHOM ARE
YOU LOOKING FOR?**

**ONCE THEY HEAR MARY’S SUMMARY OF THE
SITUATION—“THEY HAVE TAKEN THE LORD OUT
OF THE TOMB, AND WE DO NOT KNOW WHERE
THEY HAVE LAID HIM”—*THEY* RUN TO THE TOMB.
AND IT IS QUITE A FOOTRACE.**

IT IS NOT PETER, THE MAN OF ACTION WHO WINS THE RACE, BUT THE BELOVED DISCIPLE. OF COURSE. IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE, IN THE HIGHLY SYMBOLIC WORLD OF JOHN'S GOSPEL: HIS SPEED IS A MEASURE OF HIS DEVOTION.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN INDICTMENT OF THE OLD SAW, "SEEING IS BELIEVING." MARY SEES THAT THE STONE IS ROLLED AWAY FROM THE TOMB; SHE BELIEVES THAT JESUS' BODY HAS BEEN STOLEN. THE BELOVED DISCIPLE AND PETER BOTH SEE THE GRAVE CLOTHES LYING INSIDE THE TOMB; PETER BELIEVES IT'S TIME TO GO BACK HOME, WHILE THE BELOVED ONE SIMPLY "BELIEVES."

**WE DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IS BELIEVED,
BUT WE ARE TOLD THAT THEY DON'T YET
UNDERSTAND WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON.**

**AND THEN MARY IS LEFT ALONE, AND SHE IS
WEEPING. I KNOW THAT THIS IS NOT THE FIRST
TIME IN HISTORY, NOR WILL IT BE THE LAST, IN
WHICH SOMEONE WHO HAS ENDURED THE
DEATH OF SOMEONE HE OR SHE LOVES AT THE
HANDS OF A BRUTAL REGIME HAS BEEN LEFT
WITHOUT EVEN A BODY.**

MARY IS WEEPING OVER THIS FINAL HEARTBREAKING INDIGNITY, THAT NOT ONLY IS HE DEAD, BUT SHE HAS LOST HER BEST HOPE TO BE NEAR HIM, LEANING ON THE FAR SIDE OF THAT ENORMOUS CAR-SIZED STONE.

AND MAYBE THAT IS WHY, AT LAST, SHE BENDS OVER TO LOOK INSIDE THE TOMB. IF SHE CAN'T HAVE THE BODY, OR THE CLOSENESS, AT THE VERY LEAST, SHE WOULD LIKE HER QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED. AND SO SHE LOOKS INTO THE TOMB, WHERE SHE FINDS A PAIR OF ANGELS, SITTING.

**AND WE'RE READY FOR THIS—WE'RE WEARING
OUR RESURRECTION LENSES, AFTER ALL! THEY
SAY TO HER, "WOMAN, WHY ARE YOU
WEEPING?" AND MUSTERING UP ALL THE
DIGNITY SHE CAN AT DAWN, LOOKING INTO A
BURIAL VAULT AT A COUPLE OF ANGELS, SHE
SAYS, "THEY HAVE TAKEN AWAY MY LORD, AND
I DO NOT KNOW WHERE THEY HAVE LAID HIM."
SHE SEES ANGELS, AND STILL SHE BELIEVES
THAT JESUS' CORPSE HAS BEEN STOLEN.**

FOR SOME REASON, SHE TURNS AROUND.

WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

**MARY IS STILL LOOKING FOR A BODY. SHE SEES,
BUT SHE STILL DOES NOT BELIEVE OR EVEN
RECOGNIZE.**

WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

**I HAVE A HUNCH THAT, ON EASTER SUNDAY
MORNING IN YEARS NOT PRECEDED BY THE
WORD PANDEMIC ----- WHEN WE COME TO
CHURCH TO EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY AND THE
PAGEANTRY, THE FLOWERS AND THE LILIES
AND THE BELLS RINGING AND THE VOICES
SOARING, WE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMEONE,
AND SOMETHING, VERY SPECIFIC.**

**I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR
OURSELVES.**

**I BELIEVE WE COME TO HEAR THE
RESURRECTION PROCLAMATION IN THE HOPES
THAT, SOMEWHERE IN THE STORY, WE WILL SEE
SOMEONE WHO REMINDS US OF OURSELVES.**

**BECAUSE, IF I CAN FIND MYSELF IN THAT STORY
SOMEWHERE, IF SOMEONE LIKE ME FOUND
THEIR FAITH ON AN EASTER DAY SO LONG AGO,
MAYBE I CAN FIND A WAY OF STEPPING INTO
THE STREAM OF FAITH AS WELL.**

**SO, LET'S TAKE OFF OUR RESURRECTION
LENSES FOR A MOMENT, AND LOOK AGAIN AT
OUR STORY.**

**WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR? ARE YOU
LOOKING FOR MARY? THE DISCIPLE WHOSE
TEARS LEAD HER TO AN ENCOUNTER WITH
JESUS, THE ONE WHOM HE CALLS BY NAME?**

**THERE IS SOMETHING POWERFUL ABOUT
HEARING YOUR NAME CALLED. WE ARE GIVEN
NAMES AT BIRTH, AND FROM THE VERY FIRST
HOURS OF OUR LIVES WE HEAR THOSE NAMES,
OVER AND OVER, IN THE VOICES OF THOSE, WE
HOPE, LOVE US BEST.**

A PREACHING COLLEAGUE TOLD THE STORY ABOUT HOW HIS MOTHER STARTED SINGING A SONG TO HIS NEWBORN DAUGHTER, “KATY! BEAUTIFUL KATY! YOU’RE THE ONLY GIRL THAT I ADORE!” AND SOON, ANY TIME SHE HEARD HER SONG, KATY WOULD TURN TOWARD THE SINGER. IT WAS HER SONG. IT WAS HER NAME.

JESUS SAYS JUST ONE WORD TO THE WEEPING WOMAN. “MARY.” HE CALLS HER BY NAME. AND SHE TURNS, AND IN THAT TURNING, SHE FINALLY RECOGNIZES JESUS.

**HAVE YOUR TEARS LED YOU TO JESUS? HAVE
YOU HEARD JESUS CALL YOUR NAME? ARE YOU
LOOKING FOR MARY?**

**OR ARE YOU LOOKING FOR PETER, THE ONE
WHO TRIES, AND TRIES HARD, BUT DOESN'T
ALWAYS GET IT. MY PARENTS---I BELIEVE ----
FOUND IT VERY HARD TO BELIEVE..... HOW I
WISH THEY HAD BEEN ABLE---OR HAD TAKEN
THE TIME----- TO READ THE MEMOIRS OF
MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA, WHOM THE
ENTIRE WORLD LOOKED UP TO FOR HER
BRILLIANT WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL,**

**FOR HER DEVOTION TO GOD'S MOST
VULNERABLE, POOREST, MOST DESPISED
PEOPLE.....**

**MOTHER TERESA, WHO INSPIRED THE WORLD,
DESCRIBED HER OWN SPIRITUAL LIFE AS DRY,
DARK, AND LONELY. SHE TRIED SO HARD, JUST
LIKE PETER. DO YOU FIND FAITH MORE AN
EFFORT THAN A JOY? ARE YOU LOOKING FOR
PETER?**

**OR ARE YOU LOOKING FOR THE BELOVED
DISCIPLE? THE ONE WHOSE DEVOTION TO
JESUS CARRIES HIM SWIFTLY TO THE TOMB?**

IS BELIEVING, FOR YOU, ALMOST BESIDE THE POINT, BECAUSE YOUR HEART CARRIES YOU PAST BELIEVING INTO INTIMACY AND RELATIONSHIP?

THE IDEA OF “BELIEF” HAS CHANGED THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES. EVER SINCE THE ENLIGHTENMENT, THE DAWNING OF THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD, “BELIEF” HAS COME TO MEAN ADHERENCE TO PROPOSITIONS, ALMOST A CHECK-OFF LIST.

FOR CHRISTIANS, THIS LIST WOULD INCLUDE THINGS LIKE: JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD, CHECK..... JESUS WAS BORN OF A VIRGIN, CHECK..... JESUS ROSE BODILY FROM THE DEAD, CHECK, CHECK AND DOUBLE-CHECK! -----BUT IN JESUS' DAY, BELIEF WAS MORE ABOUT RELATIONSHIP, AND TRUST, AND LOVE.....

WHAT MATTERED WASN'T BELIEF *ABOUT*; WHAT MATTER WAS BELIEF *IN*. THE BELOVED DISCIPLE BELIEVED IN JESUS BECAUSE HE LOVED AND WAS LOVED BY JESUS, AND THAT LOVE LIFTED HIM PAST THE NEED FOR THE CHECK-OFFS.

IS RELATIONSHIP THE FOUNDATION OF YOUR FAITH? IS LOVE? ARE YOU LOOKING FOR THE BELOVED DISCIPLE?

I BELIEVE WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR OURSELVES IN THE EASTER STORY, AND ONCE WE LOCATE OURSELVES THERE, WE CAN AT LAST BEGIN TO LOOK FOR JESUS—NOT SOME SHELL OF THE MAN, BUT THE REAL, LIVING, BREATHING JESUS, THE ONE WHO CALLS US EACH BY NAME, THE ONE WHO WE MAY NOT ENTIRELY GET OR UNDERSTAND, THE ONE WHO WOULD FAR PREFER OUR LOVE TO OUR INTELLECTUAL ASSENT.

WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR? LET'S STOP FOR
A MINUTE, BEFORE PUTTING BACK ON THOSE
RESURRECTION LENSES, AND SIMPLY INHALE
THE CRISP AIR OF THE UNEXPECTED, THE
STARTLED MOMENT BEFORE THE RECOGNITION.
RESURRECTION COMES WHEN WE ARE MOST
AND LEAST FILLED WITH LOVE, WHEN WE GET IT
AND WE DON'T GET IT, WHEN WE ARE STOOPED
WITH SORROW AND LAUGHING OUR HEADS OFF.
RESURRECTION COMES, NOT AT OUR BIDDING,
BUT AT GOD'S PLEASURE, NOT BECAUSE WE
HAVE EARNED IT BUT BECAUSE GOD WANTS IT,
NOT BECAUSE WE ARE PERFECT BUT BECAUSE
GOD LOVES US PERFECTLY.

RESURRECTION COMES BECAUSE JESUS'
PROJECT OF HEALING AND WELCOMING AND
LOVING US ISN'T FINISHED AND WILL NOT BE
STOPPED.

CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED. THANKS BE TO GOD.

PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN..... ALLELUIA!