

“Relax, It’s Easter”
John 20: 1- 18; Isaiah 25: 6 - 9

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April 4th, 2010

Because Easter Sunday is the most attended Sunday in the church year, more than a few of us ministers experience a wee bit of panic while trying to prepare the sermon for that Sunday. It’s not that a minister doesn’t give careful thought to every sermon, but this is Easter, and the place is packed, and we ministers are human, too, and don’t want anyone going home disappointed by today’s message. Easter Sunday creates a lot of pressure for us worship leaders, from choosing hymns to picking the perfect anthems to delivering the best Easter sermon ever. Let me just be trite and mundane here--Easter Sunday is our Super Bowl Sunday or maybe more appropriately for the season, the NCAA Championship game between Butler and Duke!

All of the angst over putting together an Easter sermon reminded me of when my father, who was a mechanical engineer and very good at math, used to help me with my math homework. Somewhere in the process of explaining a problem to me over and over and over again, he would set down his pencil, look at me and say, “You’re making something hard out of something easy.”

Which is exactly what one theologian says we preachers do on Easter Sunday. She writes that “preachers end up with a crisis of confidence facing the Easter proclamation” when in fact, the first word that John 20: 1- 18 offers to the Easter preacher is, ‘Relax.’” Relax, it’s Easter. And Easter means that weeping has been replaced by dancing, darkness overcome by light, life has triumphed over death. She’s right--it’s far and away the easiest message to proclaim. We preachers don’t have to make it into something hard.

What I would like to do is help you to see why what happened that Easter morning over 2000 years matters to you and to me today. But if I don’t succeed, at least we’ll all leave here having heard, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed” enough times through scripture, song, and sermon that we’ll carry it in our hearts as we go out into the world.

The good news that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead was very good, very welcome news to his devoted disciple, Mary Magdalene. You see, we come at this story already knowing how it turns out--we know he's alive, we know the tomb is empty, we don't have to remember his words about being raised from the dead--in four different gospel accounts we can read his words about being raised from the dead. We are a leg up on Mary Magdalene as, in the dim light between evening and dawn, she makes her way to the tomb where they laid Jesus.

She didn't have any reason to go to the tomb. It's not like in the other gospels, where the women went to the tomb early in order to dutifully anoint Jesus' dead body with oil. In John's account, the anointing had already been done by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus using mixture of myrrh and aloes, 100 pounds of it in fact. So Mary wasn't there to anoint his body with oil; she was simply there to grieve. To be closer to this teacher whom she loved, whose face she had last glimpsed as he suffered and hung on the cross. The gospel of John records that Mary stood near the cross, watching. Now Mary wanted to draw closer to Jesus again.

Haven't we done that after the burial of a loved one? Or haven't we wanted to? After the funeral home staff has left, after the family has gone home, we carefully make our way back to the grave and stand before the freshly-shoveled mound of dirt, staring at the temporary grave marker. The flowers are still fresh and beautiful. We just want to be close to our loved one in heart, mind, soul and body. Maybe we have something we wanted to say to our loved one but couldn't in front of all those people. Or maybe we were the strong one throughout the funeral process, holding everyone else as they wept and now it's our turn to weep alone.

So Mary came to weep quietly or maybe very vocally before the tomb of her beloved teacher. She came with a broken heart and found more about which to weep--the stone has been removed from the entrance of the tomb and it meant only one thing to Mary: Jesus' body had been moved. In further grief, she found the disciples--who, unlike Mary, were hiding behind closed doors, in fear that what

happened to Jesus might well happen to them--but only two of the disciples responded to her news. And they engaged in some sort of silly foot race, the one disciple outrunning Peter but not entering the tomb. Peter followed behind and boldly entering the tomb where he didn't find the grave clothes in disarray, if the body had been stolen or quickly moved, but found the graveclothes lying neatly folded in two piles. Apparently neither Peter nor the other disciple remembered Jesus' words about being raised from the dead, as they both returned to their homes. And no doubt locked their doors.

We've got to give Mary her due, she's dogged in her desire to find out what happened to Jesus body and where it is. The depth of her devotion might lead one to imagine that even if his body were taken straight to Pilate's palace, for example, she'd have found a way to get inside in order to be near his body. She returned to the tomb, her grief now doubled, and stood weeping before the empty tomb. And weeping, she bent down to look into the tomb and her grief was so great, she wasn't even fazed by the presence of two angels. She even answered their question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and after answering, she turned and bumped right into the gardener.

See, this is where it's good to know how the story ends. We can get excited because we know it's not the gardener into whom Mary bumps, even John tells his readers that it's not the gardener. We know that in just a minute or two--maybe less!--Mary's grief will turn to joy. But for the moment, we wait with anticipation while Mary stands between the deep sadness of an empty tomb and the possibility of being able to grieve over the dead body of her teacher if this gardener will be her guide. Her grief has reached its maximum; her pleading is poignant and sincere.

And then in the simplest way, he spoke her name: "Mary." It's all she had to hear to know who he was, for his words about being raised from the dead came flooding back into her mind, for her to greet him and grab hold of him with such fierce joy and affection that he had to restrain her and say, "Don't hold onto me yet. Do go tell the disciples that all is well; my Father is your Father; my God is your God."

You know, the people whom we love the most have a special way of saying our names. It's a lilt in their voice or it's a regional accent or even a speech impediment! They say our name like no one else, and to hear our name is to feel loved and welcomed and reassured that everything is going to be all right. That's what Mary hears when Jesus speaks her name.

Cameron Murchison writes, "When Mary's name was called by the risen Jesus, she was enfolded into the company of heaven, and she recognized the One who now lives directly within and from the life of God." The calling of her name pushed aside her grief and replaced it with gladness; took her weeping and turned it into joy. She had seen the risen Lord, and was only too happy to announce to the sad, fearful and broken-hearted disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Or more to the point, maybe she said to them, "Relax, I've seen the Lord," and when she told them her story, they, too, remembered what Jesus had said--that he would rise from the dead, that he was the resurrection and the life, that they would know pain but they would see him again and their hearts would rejoice.

As Bible stories go, it doesn't get much better than this. Gail O'Day writes, "John 20: 1 - 18 is one of the most beautifully told stories in all of Scripture, and its beauty and power come from its simplicity and transparency. For the reader of this story, everything is right there on the page--nothing is hidden or held back. The heart of the Easter proclamation resides in the moment when we are claimed by the truth of the resurrection."

You and I know the story by heart--maybe not this particular version, but no matter how the details vary from gospel to gospel, the truth of the resurrected Jesus shines through the dim predawn light and gives us hope. Hope that there is life after death, whether we are facing our own death or the death of a loved one. Hope that grieving will be replaced by laughter and joy, even in the very worst of tragedies. Hope that in our darkest hours, Jesus stands with us, even if we don't recognize him at first--until we hear our name spoken consolingly by a brother or sister in Christ or feel his touch in the

sympathetic hug of a friend or read comforting words in a note or letter. Hope that when we feel lost in our grief or suffering, this resurrection story will help us find our way back, face-to-face with our Risen Lord and enable us to say "I have seen the Lord!"

So relax, it's Easter. And Easter means that dancing has replaced our weeping, light has overcome our darkness, life has triumphed over death. To quote the less familiar but equally beautiful words of Isaiah, "On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, and he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever; the Lord God will wipe away all the tears from all faces. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation,"

Relax--for Christ has risen; he has risen, indeed.