

Sermon

Seeking: Life Hidden in Christ

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Easter

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

John 20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Col. 3:1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

I. When the Gospel according to John finally gets to the most important moment . . . the scene is set in darkness!

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

- A. The discovery which leads her from grief to hope begins in darkness.**
 - 1. Let us not move too quickly past that.**
- B. If you were at the Good Friday service of Tenebrae (gathering darkness), you have been helped to fully enter into the darkness in which the story of Easter begins.**
- C. Yesterday also offered you an opportunity to wonder about the darkness of the tomb in which Jesus moved from death to resurrection.**
- D. Like lost people wandering in a dark-forest who stumble upon a campfire, those who first encounter the empty tomb need time to let their eyes adjust to new and unexpected light.**
- E. We too — you and I — have our own difficulties stepping out of the darkness and into the light of a new day in which God’s love has made all things new and the impossible - possible.**

1. We might be tempted to think that this is a story about Mary and Peter and John, that it is essentially a history lesson, rather than recognizing that it is *our story* told for theological reasons which are as present and as urgent today as they were when the gospel according to John was first penned.

II. Mary comes to the tomb early in the day.

A. It is unclear from John's gospel why she comes.

1. Maybe she comes to simply be with his body and continue in grief.
2. Maybe she comes to perform some task which tradition demands be done for a newly deceased person.
3. Maybe she isn't sure herself why she comes to the tomb in the darkness of that first day of the week.
 - a. Drawn to the tomb for unexplainable reasons.

B. Whatever her reasons, it becomes apparent that she does not come expecting to encounter God or Jesus.

(to Peter and John) "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

(To the angels) "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

(to Jesus) “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

- C. There is no mention of God. It isn’t that GOD has removed the body. It is that someone else has done it
- D. We might wonder how Mary can look into the tomb, see two angels there, and still be preoccupied with earthly concerns . . .
 - 1. But *what we expect to encounter deeply shapes what we encounter.*
- E. Story of Sarah unable to see her sister because she was looking for someone else (Mike).

III. Mary *does* come to see the situation clearly in time.

- A. Jesus calls her by name . . . and the man she supposed to be the gardener is revealed to her as the embodiment of her Lord.
- B. She is filled with an impulse to tell others that “I have seen the Lord!”
- C. That simple declaration became an essential part of the early church’s testimony. The good news which they felt compelled to share was that death had been overcome —
 - 1. that God was still at work in the world to redeem all things;
 - 2. that when we commit ourselves to a life of discipleship we enter into that new life not

alone — but with the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit;

- 3. that whenever two or more gather in Jesus' name, — there God will be also;**
- 4. that whenever we follow in the path of loving service to a hurting world, God is there too.**

IV. That is the “Good News” which was understood to be gospel.

A. A witness not only to the miracle of resurrection

B. But even more to what that resurrection implied about the nature of God and the nature of our discipleship.

- 1. That God's love conquered the problem of death.**
- 2. That we have now been entrusted with the holy work of sharing the good news that we are not alone in addressing the many problems of our world, but that we are given:**
 - a. One another as fellow disciples,**
 - b. the presence and power of the HS.**
- 3. It doesn't all depend on us and that is good news.**

How did this improbable story become the core testimony of a religion which swept the world?

V. There was something which convinced others that the Christians were legit. That their story of a risen Lord was in some profound and mysterious way true!

A. That something else was that they walked the walk.

- 1. They cared for and fed the poor**
- 2. They stood in solidarity with the oppressed**
- 3. They shared their wealth in extraordinary generosity**
- 4. They prayed for instead of against their enemies**
- 5. They endured hardships, nakedness, peril, the sword, and other persecutions with patient endurance**
- 6. They dared to speak truth to power**
- 7. They showed faithful, committed solidarity to both family and their communities**
- 8. They paid their fair-share of taxes ungrudgingly**
- 9. They rescued abandoned babies who were left to die of exposure**
- 10. They visited the prisons and hospitals to care for the inmates and prisoners**
- 11. They cared for the elderly with dignity & respect.**
- 12. And they humbly refused to take credit for all these extraordinary acts of mercy and kindness — always deflecting the praise toward the risen Christ who they said was the inspiration for their faithfulness.**

VI. *They* were not good and holy — it was *the life of Christ hidden within* that made it possible for them to live in humble, obedient, steadfast loving-kindness.

- A. Baptism was a way of acknowledging a commitment to live a new life — dead to all that was opposed to the kingdom of God and newly alive to the potential of helping God in the noble work of redeeming a hurting world.**

Col. 3:1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

- B. Ancient pattern of collecting those who were ready to profess faith and baptizing them on Easter.**

- C. In that context the idea of answering Christ’s call to “Follow me” by**

- 1. taking up a cross and dying was easy to understand.**

- D. Baptism was a sacrament organized around the themes of death and rebirth —**

- 1. of immersing in the water as a metaphor for lying in a coffin and rising from the water as one still following Christ in a post-death resurrection-life.**

- E. This new life is a participation in the life of Christ.**

2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

- F. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving=**

- 1. “Lift up your hearts.” / “We lift them to the Lord.”**
2. Colossians urges us to lift up our hearts,

- † not to abandon the present world, but to
- † regard the present world in proper perspective,
- † from the point of view of the risen Christ.

VII. Christians turn to the sacraments as signs of what is new and different for a person of faith in the wake of resurrection.

A. Baptism as a joining of our life with the life of Christ

1. We die and we rise *with Christ* in our baptism.
2. We share in his blessing at baptism “You are my beloved.”
3. We join with Christ in pursuing the redemption of this world through love and service and generosity.
4. Symbolized by baptizing “into the eighth day”

B. At the Table we are sustained in the Christ-like work of being a “living sacrifice.”

1. We say that in the Great Prayer each time we come to the Table — “Accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving as a living and holy offering of ourselves, that our lives may proclaim the One crucified and risen.”

C. To confess, “Christ is risen!” was to *begin living in a completely new way* living as if one was beginning to live forever — not just here and now — but forever.

Charge — We began Lent with the reminder that our disciplines for keeping a holy Lent were best done “in secret.”

Jesus instructed: Matthew 6

Matt. 6:1 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matt. 6:2 “So whenever you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matt. 6:5 “And whenever you pray, ... go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Today as we celebrate the resurrection Colossians has provided similar guidance — we embody the life of Christ, hidden within, knowing that to God be all praise, and honor, and glory for each act of faith.

Perhaps like me you have encountered Christians whose faith is “performative.” They are always doing the right thing so that others will see them doing the right thing.

4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

There is a still better way - to live faithfully but quietly, letting the new life speak for itself as we do all that is require to join God in making a workable creation.