

Sermon – “For Whom Are You Looking?”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 25:6-9, John 20:1-18

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Rev. Dr. Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah, chapter 25, verses 6 through 9. In this passage, Isaiah announces God's victory in the final events of history. The celebration of God's victory over death includes a lavish, ritual meal to which all peoples are invited to eat together in harmony. The hope of Isaiah is at the heart of Easter and makes a fitting reading for Holy week. Hear now, the word of God:

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Amen.

And now, let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God's Holy Word.

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. 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!" Ra BOONE' E (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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “For Whom are You Looking?”

The text: Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" John 20:15

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Ernest Hemingway introduces his novel For Whom the Bell Tolls with a quote from the seventeenth century English poet and cleric, John Donne:

No man is an island, Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

Camaraderie, death and grief are preoccupations in Hemingway's 1940 classic about an American, Robert Jordan, who fought, loved and died with the anti-fascist rebels in the Basque mountains during the Spanish Civil War. Most of the characters contemplate their own death and are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice "as all good men should."

This Thursday, April 9, at 2:15 in the afternoon Westminster will join churches across the country ringing our bells in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and those who made the ultimate sacrifice. The Reverend Albert Hale was pastor of Westminster at that time and was friend and counselor to the Martyr President, whose bell would toll following his untimely death shortly thereafter. Although we usually understand the funeral bell to toll for the dead, John Donne and Ernest Hemingway reassure us that the bell tolls for the living, for those left behind who mourn the loss of their loved ones.

On that first Easter morning, the bell tolls for Mary, Peter and the other disciple who have lost a loved one, a mentor and a friend. *Death not only ends life, but also cripples it. Death exercises power over life, both as individuals recognize their own mortality, and as they suffer the loss of those they love.* (Gail O'Day)

The discovery and the evidence of the empty tomb, which swallows up death, unfolds in dramatic fashion in John's gospel: First, Mary sees the stone rolled away; then, the beloved disciple notices the linen cloths lying in the tomb: Finally, Peter also sees the head wrapping, folded and lying separately. John describes in great detail what Peter sees when he enters the tomb. There may be an apologetic intent here, a defense against charges that the tomb was empty because Jesus' body was stolen. Grave robbers don't take the time to unbind the body from its wrappings. But the description of the burial cloths has a more important theological function, according to Gail O'Day. At Lazarus's exit from the tomb in John 11, a foreshadowing of Jesus' power over death, Lazarus' burial cloths are also described in great detail as he emerges still wrapped in them. Lazarus is dependent upon Jesus' command to the community outside the tomb to unbind him and let him go. Jesus' grave clothes, on the other hand, remain in the empty tomb. He took them off himself and folded them. No one has taken Jesus' body away; when Jesus walked out of that tomb, he left death behind.

According to John, then the disciples return to their homes, perhaps looking for a private space in which to shed their tears of loss, wonder and bewilderment. But Mary stood outside the tomb, weeping, waiting for the One for whom she was looking.

John is the only Gospel in which Mary weeps at the tomb. There is something powerful and personal about weeping. John Phillip Newell, a present day poet and teacher who is known for his work in Celtic Spirituality, reminds us of a sixth century practice on the Island of Iona in his book A New Harmony. *One of the rules St. Columba gave to his monastic community was to pray "until thy tears come." When tears flow, something very deep within us is stirring. Prayer is about getting in touch with the deepest dimension of our being. It is "the moistness of the soul," says Hildegard of Bingen, that leads us "to shed tears."*

And when we see through tears, we see differently. We see the world as if washed by a sea rain. When we weep for those we love, we see something of their diamond essence glistening forth. And when we weep, we see that the hard edges of life have become blurred. Even though brokenness may have caused our tears, when we weep we are close to life's oneness.

John Phillip Newell goes on to share an experience he had as a young man visiting Dublin, Ireland. One evening he wandered past St. Patrick's Cathedral and noticed that a performance of Handel's Messiah was about to begin. St. Patrick's choir had in fact been the first to sing Handel's new oratorio in 1747. John Phillip Newell bought a ticket and entered the cathedral. The overture was already under way as he squeezed past some elegantly dressed couples in his old rain-soaked coat and sat down. When the opening words from Isaiah 40 were song "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," he began to weep, unexpectedly. Tears streamed down his face.

As we listen to Mary weep at the tomb, we remember the One for whom she weeps, we hear his tender voice call her name and the words of comfort he spoke before he died ring in our ears: *So you have pain and sorrow now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16)*

This is the good news of Easter, my friends. No one can take away your joy because we have a God who not only joined us in our humanity, we have a God who conquered death by dying on a cross. We have a God who has the courage to love, the courage to lose and who will comfort us when we love and lose.

Today we commemorate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and we proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb.

Today is the day of Resurrection, a day to remember, a day for tears of joy. Today the bell tolls for thee... for all who have found life in death, joy in sorrow and the fullness of God's presence in an empty tomb! So be it! Hallelujah! Amen.