

Easter Sunday
Sermon for March 23, 2008
Raymond Raney

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2,14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!

We get to rejoice. We know the end of the story. We know why the tomb was empty. It's like jumping to the end of a mystery to find out who the murderer is so you don't have to wait to find out. We have 2000 years of knowing the end of the story.

But Mary Magdalene didn't. The other disciples didn't.

It seems to be implied that Peter and the beloved disciple saw the empty tomb and believed, but the Gospel doesn't tell us what they believed. One assumes that they believe that Jesus has risen. Maybe they believed what the Chief Priests believed in the Gospel reading for Holy Saturday, that the body had been stolen to perpetrate a hoax that Jesus had risen from the dead. It doesn't say. It's clear, though, that if they believed Jesus had risen, they didn't know what to do. They were all locked in a room because they were afraid.

We would have been afraid, too. Just days before, they had witnessed the humiliating death of Jesus on the Cross – their leader, the leader of this upstart Jewish sect had been singled out, tried, sentenced and crucified. They were probably trembling in their boots expecting that the authorities would be coming after them next. They locked themselves in a room, and all they could do was wait.

Waiting, that's the hard part: Waiting for anything. Waiting for test results, waiting for news, waiting for – you name it – or just waiting for it to be over – that sense of inevitability – that dread – that in the end, it's just that – over.

I think I'm a lot more like Mary Magdalene than the disciples. I want answers, not living in fear. I want it spelled out for me. I want to know where have they taken the body of my beloved teacher. What have they done with him? Do you know? Can you help me? I want to understand.

Mary doesn't understand, so she turns to the closest person, and asks him. She doesn't recognize him. She thinks he's the gardener. And when he says her name, "Rabbouni" she shouts. Now she knows.

Yes, Mary, it is I. And all that I told you has come to pass.”

And Mary does as she is told. She goes to the disciples and tells them: “I have seen the Lord.”

I’ve spent a lot of time this week thinking about what to say about Easter. I asked myself: “What does this story have to say to us.”

First off, like Mary, most of us wouldn’t recognize Jesus. Let me correct that, we don’t see Jesus in our lives, not just in church, but in our everyday interactions with everyone we know: those we love, and those we love a little less. But then, every once in awhile, we turn to someone, someone we probably mistake for the gardener, and hear our names called. In that moment, we choose – either to listen, or to forget.

Secondly, I think there is a truth that the empty tomb teaches us. We wait. Always, we wait. And many of us wait for this just to be over. That’s the lesson. It’s not just an end, it’s not just over. There is something more.

Mary is at her lowest point. Depressed, dejected, desperate, at her most needy. And then Mary sees Jesus. He calls her name. He breathes life into her troubled soul. She realizes that this is all real and true.

We are Mary whenever we reach that moment of desperation when we are most in need. At that point, the empty tomb tells us, turn around and listen. Jesus calls out your name. Will you hear?

In that moment, we may be able to run to our friends and tell them: “I have seen the Lord!”