BACK TO THE FUTURE
Scripture: John 20:1-128

FOCUS: Only as we return to the tomb, find it empty and move forward do we come to experience the joy which is the message of Easter

On Friday evening we went to Jerusalem. We faced an awful truth. In a very real way we were all there on the first Friday, a day which seemed at the time to be anything but good. We discovered we are often the disciples in the garden, well-intentioned but without the discipline to be and to do what we ought. The disciples did not intentionally doze off. I can identify. I have known those times. I have even literally been like them, finding myself wanting to focus on prayer in the middle of the night or in the early morning hours before dawn, only to fall asleep. More often I have simply been inattentive, distracted and bothered. I have had good intentions, intended to spend time in prayer, time writing in a journal, but I have allowed my mind and my heart to wander as I have chased a “to do” list or given in to worry and more or less dozed off in the midst of trying to be faithful.

We saw ourselves in Peter, in the brash declaration he made as Jesus warned the disciples they would all desert him. It was Peter who protested most loudly he would follow Jesus to prison or to the grave only to deny even knowing him three times before the sun rose the next morning. Like Peter I have loudly proclaimed my unshakable faith, only to deny my own declaration. For me and I suspect for many of you, my denial is not as vocal as was Peter’s but it is no less real as my actions have contradicted my declarations.

We realized we are Barabbas. It was he who deserved punishment, he who was guilty, he who escaped while unworthy. We are all in his shoes. The issue is not whether we are guilty, whether we deserve punishment, rather the question is whether we come to grips with the magnitude of the debt we owe to the one who went where we were destined to go. We don’t know how Barabbas actually reacted, but we pondered the possibility that as a result of his good fortune at the expense of another, having looked into the eyes of the one who would take his place, he became a new man. I, like Barabbas, am guilty. Like Barabbas, I have been set free and owe an immense debt of gratitude.

We saw ourselves in Simon of Cyrene. It was Simon who had come to Jerusalem as a faithful man of God. He came to participate in the sacred rites of his people. Like we who are hear this morning, he came because it was just what you did on Passover. It was meant to be a familiar and comfortable time. Worship and the rituals of the religious calendar had become routine, expected and predictable. Are we not often also guilty? We come, because it is what we do. We come knowing what to expect, save perhaps in the responses during the children’s moments. But it was anything but comfortable and predictable that Passover. Simon was conscripted to help carry a cross and he came to realize it really was his cross on which Jesus died.

The pattern is pretty clear. Those first century folks were often confused, frequently blinded to truth by preconceived notions, more than a bit selfish by nature, lacking in discipline and in need of correction. Sounds like some folks I know. Sounds like me. Sounds like all of you. But there is hope for us all, and that is precisely why we have gathered here this morning, to celebrate the hope and the victory which are ours because of what happened the first Easter morning.

Scripture doesn’t tell us much about what was going on with the disciples immediately after the crucifixion. None of them participated in the burial. None of them took upon themselves the task of properly preparing the body. None of them came forward to claim it. Perhaps they were afraid, after all they were known to be the closest associates of one who had just been put to death as an insurrectionist. I am certain they were disillusioned, for though Jesus had repeatedly foretold the events of Holy Week, laying out plainly what would occur, his followers expected his victory to be political and his kingdom to be of this earth. Now, with his death, their dreams were in shambles. So they most likely slipped away to some obscure safe location there to ponder what was now a most uncertain future. But before they could move into God’s future they had to go back, back to the scene of their tragedy, back to look into the tomb.

As is often the case, it was the women whose hearts were first moved to action. All four gospels tell us it was the women who first went to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James were among them. The details differ, but the basic story is the same. Moved with deep compassion and love, desiring to show their respect and to make sure the one they had followed was properly honored in death they went early in the morning in hopes of somehow finding a way to move the massive stone which secured the cave in which Jesus’ body had been placed. They arrived bearing spices with which to anoint the body. They arrived with heavy hearts. They arrived with a sense of duty.

One Holy Week detail I overlooked for a long time again struck me as significant as I read the various accounts of the Passion narrative this week. Those closest to Jesus, those to whom, on several occasions, he had revealed clearly the nature of the suffering and death he would experience and of the victory which would be the end result, never gave resurrection a second thought once Jesus’ body was taken away. On the other hand the Jewish authorities certainly remembered the words of Jesus. Early the morning after Jesus was buried they went to Pilate, reminded him Jesus had said after three days he would rise again. They demanded guards be assigned to stand watch to insure his followers did not come to steal the body in hopes of perpetrating a fraudulent resurrection. The faithful, the good church folk, either didn’t remember or didn’t believe what their own Lord and Master had said. But his enemies did and took action.

I fear I, like those first century disciples, am at times so close to the truth I fail to see it. Have you ever been guilty? I think sometimes those of us who gather here regularly, who participate in many of the activities of the faith, we who some would say are good church folk, can become too familiar with the message, can live too close to the wonder, and as a result fail to be filled with awe, fail to be amazed by the enormity of the events which form the foundation of our faith. I think sometimes we, like those early followers, are guilty of hearing the message but not listening, of routinely affirming the truth each Sunday then failing to live it out come Monday. So we need to travel through Passion Week, we need to come to Easter, we need to remember why we gather here in the first place, and we need to do so year after year.

We are told Pilate approved the chief priest’s request. Yet as the women arrived at the tomb there were no guards to turn them away, there was no need to move the stone, and there was no body to be anointed. Three of the four gospels recall the women arriving to find the stone already rolled away and the body missing. In Matthew’s rendering of the story we are told the stone was miraculously rolled away before their very eyes. The details may vary, but the results certainly do not. In all of the gospel accounts the women see ethereal figures who announce unequivocally the one they seek is no longer in the tomb, nor is he dead, he has been resurrected.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the women arrive at the tomb together and are instructed to go quickly and to tell the disciples the good news. But in the Gospel of John there is an interesting twist. In John Mary Magdalene goes alone, or at least she is the only one mentioned. Perhaps there were others as the synoptic report, but John wants us to focus on Mary and her encounters. In John, Mary is goes to the tomb twice. It is on her return visit she encounters the white clad figure.

It had no doubt been a sleepless night for Mary. So many things going through her mind. It was as if her whole world was coming unraveled. It was still dark outside as she made her way to the tomb. It seemed right to her to make this solemn journey surrounded by the dimness of early morning. As she walked even the trees seemed to be wearing shrouds of mist. She had known many dark days in her life, most of them brought on by her own irresponsible behavior, but none were as bleak as this day.

As she walked, Mary remembered. She remembered the times of her youth when she thought she could bring fullness to life by entering completely into all the things of the world. She remembered her relentless search for pleasure above all and the downward spiral which was its end. She remembered how hopeless life had become, how meaningless. She remembered the despair which engulfed her on the day Jesus came into her life. But most of all she remembered how the one to whose tomb she was now going had given her hope in the midst of her brokenness. She remembered how he had offered compassion at a time in her life when she had become accustomed to being treated only with disdain.

Mary remembered how he gave her what no one else could. Jesus offered forgiveness. Then he had shown her the way to be made whole. He called upon her to repent, to put aside her foolish and sinful ways and to live a life governed by love of God and love for of all God’s people. He offered an abundant life, and abundant it had been until Friday.

As she approached the tomb, her thoughts were focused on the one whose lifeless body lay there. She was unprepared for what she found. The massive stone which secured the cavernous gravesite had been moved. John reports she immediately fled. It was unimaginable. She ran back to where the disciples were laying low, seeking to avoid the suspicious eyes of the authorities. ***“Someone has taken away the body of our Lord, and I don’t know where it is!”*** she said. She probably assumed grave robbers had been at work. There was a lucrative trade in items taken shamefully from the bodies of those recently laid to rest.

Most of the disciples were unconvinced, perhaps even dismissive. But Peter and John were moved to action by Mary’s report. They rushed out to the tomb, and entered to find it was indeed empty, save for the grave clothes which were neatly laid out where the body had once been. Only then did they begin to remember what Jesus had said, what scripture had foretold, and they believed. Eleven disciples ran away and were in hiding after the crucifixion. Only two were moved to action when they heard of the empty tomb. Only two returned to the city, only two went back and it was then they came to understand the truth.

Only as the two returned to the site of the Passion did they come to understand the full meaning of the events. Only as they came to understand all Jesus did for them were they enabled to move ahead, to face the future and to live into the glory of God’s kingdom. You might say they had to go back to get to the future. So it is for us, that is why we are here, some two millennia later. We need to go back to the cross. We often sing ***“Jesus, keep me near the cross”*** on Good Friday. We are indeed people of the cross, those redeemed by God’s grace, those called to remain near the cross. But we need also to go back to the empty tomb, there to marvel at the wonder of it all and to rejoice in the knowledge Jesus is alive.

Of course you can’t go back where you have never been. If you have never marveled at the wonder of the resurrection, have never come to a personal relationship with the risen Lord, I encourage you to make that commitment. Many of us have done so, some of us a long, long time ago. But I fear we are like those disciples who didn’t understand or didn’t remember, like the nine who, because of fear or skepticism, missed the wonder of an encounter at the empty tomb. We may well need to go back to the cross, back to the empty tomb. Then, having revisited the story, we are called to move boldly into the future, a future filled with God’s grace, a future marked by life abundant and eternal., a life marked by exuberant joy.

VIDEO

The grave is still empty, he is indeed still risen. Maybe if he were to send text, a tweet or a Facebook message we would pay attention. But that is not how God works. God speaks to hearts, to minds to spirits. And if we will listen with our hearts, open our minds and awaken our spirits we will hear the news which calls for shouts of joy. We will not be able to keep from smiling and we may even choose to jump up and down on occasion. As we will sing in a moment Jesus seeks to walk with us and talk with us along life’s narrow way as he lives within our hearts.

What the empty tomb meant to the disciple and to the women, it means to us. It means joy, it means hope, it means assurance and it means commissioning. Those who rejoiced upon the resurrection didn’t simply hear the news and go home to a great meal and an afternoon of family fun and hidden eggs, only to return to life as normal the next morning. History tells us they were forever changed, they became bearers of good news as they followed the example of the one they thought they had lost. They heard the call to love, to love God and to love God’s children. It didn’t come written on a screen, it was written on their hearts. There is nothing wrong with family meals and relaxing afternoons. I look forward to just that myself today. But if we leave this morning without hearing the challenge we are like those nine disciples who just didn’t get it who failed to go back to see the future.

He is still risen, still alive. He still calls us all. For your sake, for the sake of a world which needs to hear the news, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who is the resurrector, may we all answer the call to love as we have been loved. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN