BEYOND THE TOMB
Scripture: John 20:1-18

FOCUS: As Easter people we must hear Jesus when he calls our name.

Over the past few days many of us have been considering the events of Holy Week as we worshipped together and reflected on all that was the chaos of Holy Week. On Thursday those of us who were at the Communion service saw a dramatic reflection of the exuberance and recklessness which defined the character of Simon Peter. I loved the actor’s portrayal of a fast talking wide eyed and hyper fellow. It was exactly how I have always pictured him. Peter played a central role in the events of this week. Indeed Peter was often at the center of the gospel narratives. And those stories are, in part, responsible for the encouragement I felt as we moved through the week toward the victory which is today, Easter Sunday. Though Peter is a formidable character, he is also most vulnerable and very human.

In the upper room he uttered that brash declaration of faithfulness. As Jesus warned the disciples that they would all desert him it was Peter who protested most loudly that night. ***“I’ll follow you to prison or to the grave”***, he said. It was Peter who only hours later, even before the sun rose the next morning, would three times deny even knowing Jesus. It was Peter whose memory was awakened and whose spirit was pierced by the crowing of that rooster which marked the third denial. It was Peter who along with John accompanied Jesus deep into the garden that awful night. There Jesus had a simple request, that the two stay awake and pray as Jesus went further into the garden to pray alone. It was Peter who couldn’t even mange to stay awake for even a single hour that night, much less to be in prayer. Three times Jesus gave him and the other disciple the opportunity to, in the time of his greatest need, pray for the mentor they had been following for the past three years. Three times Peter and his compatriot failed. It was Peter who, perhaps seeking to atone for his repeated foibles, in a moment of unrestrained exuberance, completely out of touch with the wishes of his Lord, sliced off the ear of the chief priest’s servant only to witness Jesus putting back on in an instant.

Excessive exuberance was nothing new for Peter during Holy week. It was Peter who, failing to comprehend the uniqueness of Jesus, sought to build shrines to Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the mountain after the transfiguration. It was to Peter that Jesus offered the opportunity to affirm his faith by walking to him on water. It was Peter who began to walk but became afraid and lost faith as the winds began to blow. It was Peter who had to be rescued by Jesus as he began to sink beneath the waves. It was Peter who had the audacity to take Jesus aside and to chastise him for speaking the truth of his impending suffering, death and resurrection. It was Peter who declared that such would never happen. It was Peter who took great pride in asking if he should forgive seven times, expecting to be offered praise for his wisdom and generosity only to be told that seven times was not nearly enough.

The pattern is pretty clear. Peter was often confused, frequently out of control, more than a little bullheaded and perpetually in need of discipline and 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 that first Easter morning. Peter didn’t understand at first, but eventually he came to embrace the amazing truth of all that had been accomplished. And it was Peter who became the father of the church.

Scripture doesn’t tell us much about what was going on with Peter or the other disciples after the crucifixion. None of them even participated in the burial. None of them took the time to properly prepare 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 lick their wounds and to ponder what was a most uncertain future.

As is often the case, it wasn’t the men whose hearts were first moved to action. All four gospels tell us that it was the women who first went to the tomb. The details differ, but the basic story is the same. Moved with deep compassion and love, desiring to show 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 that I had largely overlooked struck me as significant as I read the various accounts of the Passion narrative this week. I was intrigued by the fact that 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 his in the end, those 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 that Jesus had said after three days he would rise again and asked that guards be assigned to stand watch and to insure that 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 they took action.

I fear that I, like those first century disciples, am at times so close to the truth that I fail to see it. Have you ever had that feeling? 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 we 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 affirming the truth perfunctorily 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 that 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 stone to be removed, and there was no body to be anointed. Three of the four gospels recall that the women arriving to find the stone already rolled away and the body missing. In Matthew’s rendering of the story we are told that 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 angels of some sort who announce unequivocally that 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 and are addressed by angelic creatures. In each case the writer reports that they are instructed to go quickly and to tell the disciples the good news. But in the Gospel of John there is a different and interesting twist. In John, Mary Magdalene goes alone, or at least she is the only one mentioned. There were almost certainly others as the synoptics report, but John wants us to focus on Mary and her encounters. In John, Mary goes to the tomb twice. It is on her return visit that she encounters the angel.

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 in danger of coming apart. It was still mostly dark as she made her way to the tomb. It seemed right to her that she would 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, I imagine Mary remembered. She remembered the times of her youth when she thought that 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 cost. She remembered how hopeless life had become, how meaningless. She remembered the despair which engulfed her. 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 Jesus gave her what no one else could have. 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 of all God’s people. He offered an abundant life, and abundant it had been from that day until that horrible Friday.

As she approached the garden, her thoughts were surely focused on the one whose lifeless body had been placed in the tomb. She was unprepared for what she found when she arrived. The massive stone which secured the cavernous gravesite had been moved. John reports that 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. It was logical to assume grave robbers had been at work. There was a lucrative trade in items taken shamefully from the bodies of those recently laid to rest and often the body would be taken to a safe location to be looted

It is at this point that we again encounter Peter. He and John were moved to action by Mary’s report. They rushed out to the tomb, leaving Mary in their wake as she sought to return with them. There is that exuberant Peter again. The arrived 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 believe. But they didn’t fully comprehend, they still didn’t remember that it was to be a resurrection morning. They believed that Jesus was gone, may have begun to recall his words of warning, but they didn’t grasp the full meaning of his absence in the garden. So they just went home.

But not Mary. Mary stayed behind, outside the tomb, and that made all the difference. She looked back in one last time and in John’s gospel that is when the angels appeared. I like the fact that it was only after Mary returned and after the two disciples had gone home that the angels appeared. In our age of instant gratification we rarely go back to look at anything, we are always plowing ahead at full speed, like Peter. And as a result we very well may miss the angelic presences that are waiting to point us beyond the tomb to where Jesus stands. It is true that the angels only asked why she was crying, but their presence and their words set her out into the presence of the one she sought. Of course Mary didn’t recognize Jesus until he called her by name but then she knew. Then she understood, then she was ready to move forward into a future which was once again bright.

The disciples didn’t stick around. They missed the angels and didn’t see Jesus. But later he would come to them and he would offer peace and assurance and would challenge them to be about serving and loving and encouraging. You see Jesus kept coming back, and through the power of His Holy Spirit he continues to come back time and time again, forever offering his gifts of grace to us all. Mary came face to face with Jesus in the garden that day and didn’t recognize him. She could very well have had a brief conversation with that gardener and gone on home, but Jesus recognized her confusion, had compassion and called her by name, and her

wounded spirit was restored. Jesus recognizes our confusion, our foolishness, our brokenness and he calls us by name, and keeps calling us as we journey through this world. But we often fail to recognize the voice, or worse we ignore it.

On this Easter morning, here on the other side of the tomb, may we not be so rushed to get home to the ham and the candy that we fail to hear the encouraging angel voices which would bring us good news on the way. And later today, and tomorrow and throughout all the days we have before us may we be alert and listening at every turn, for Jesus is surely going to be there somewhere calling your name. And when you hear him may you answer simply, ***“Here I am, use me Lord”.***  For you sake, for the sake of a world in need resurrection and for the sake of the kingdom of the resurrected Lord, let it be so in your life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.