

Easter Sunday
"Jesus and Mary"
John 20:1-18

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On the cold, drizzly evening of Tuesday, February 6th, 1951, a train called *The Broker*, because a large number of the passengers tended to be stock brokers on Wall Street in New York City, was heading southward towards the New Jersey shore. As it approached my home town of Woodbridge, N.J., the train was supposed to slow down to 25 miles per hour because a new railroad bridge was under construction and so a temporary trestle had been set up in its place. However, rather than slow down, this south Jersey express continued to proceed at its regular speed of over 50 miles per hour. At precisely 5:43 p.m., as the train came to the temporary wooden structure, the foundation beneath it suddenly gave way, derailing eight of the eleven cars and sending them crashing down a 26-foot high embankment to the street below. The first two cars just fell on their side but the third and fourth cars jack-knifed into each other. In a matter of seconds, 85 persons were dead, becoming the worst train accident in New Jersey history and the third worst in U.S. history. My father was the passenger conductor on the train behind it and I remember him recounting to me the horrors of that night, how because there were so MANY dead, a number of the homes along Fulton St., a side street where the accident took place, were converted into temporary morgues in order to hold all the bodies.

On the evening of February 6th, 2001, at 5:00 p.m., I drove to the same spot where that accident had occurred exactly fifty years earlier. I spent the next forty-five minutes trying to relive the events of that terrible night. I thought of the men and women on those cars who after a long day were anxious to get home and be with their families. I could see in my mind's eye the train careening down the track moments away from total destruction. And then in my ears, I could hear the explosive crash and the crush of metal upon metal as those cars became twisted and entwined with each other before hurtling down the steep embankment. Worst of all, I could hear the cries for help that soon began once everything came to a standstill, and how within a matter of minutes, police and ambulances began to appear, rescuing those still alive while keeping the curious onlookers at bay. These were the thoughts that went through my head as I came to that spot alone to pay a silent vigil to the victims of that train wreck that evening.

Then, a couple of minutes before 5:43, another car appeared and the driver--a young man--got out. I remained in my own car, saying nothing- just observing. He checked the time and then slowly walked around the area, appearing to do much the same thing I was- praying, reflecting, paying his respect to those who had lost their lives exactly fifty years to the minute in that very spot. Then, after a few minutes, he got back into his car and drove off, utterly unaware that he had been observed the entire time. Yet, in those few minutes, a complete stranger and I became united through this tragedy as we honored the victims of what at the time was one of this country's worst transportation disasters. Death and tragedy have a way of pulling people together in an act of solemn remembrance as we observe on every anniversary of 9/11- the attack on the World Trade Center, or December 7th, the anniversary of Japan's attack upon Pearl

Harbor.

This past week, Charles Blow, who is a regular columnist for *The New York Times*, had a SIMILAR experience which he shared in an article detailing his arrival in Minneapolis for the trial of the police officer indicted in the killing of George Floyd last May. He spoke about driving to the intersection where Floyd died and the increasing trepidation he felt as he drew closer to the spot. He said that for many Afro-Americans such as himself, places like that have become “holy ground”- terrain that you should fear to tread lightly upon. He explained:

It is the reason that I never visited ground zero in New York. There is something different about these places where life is lost, and the loss has changed the world. Whether earth or pavement, those places remember things and whisper them back. These are the place where souls crossed over. You feel something when you are here...

It is the same feeling I get every time I visit the National Battlefield at Gettysburg, only a couple of hours east of here- a battle which marked the turning point in the Civil War. During three days of intense fighting in the summer of 1863, the greatest loss of life on both sides of that conflict took place. To me, it remains the most hallowed piece of ground ANYWHERE, and regardless of how many times I’ve returned to that spot, the same feeling of awe intermixed with admiration for those soldiers’ courage still overwhelms me.

Well this morning, we find ourselves joined with persons all over the earth to remember and reflect upon yet ANOTHER tragedy, at ANOTHER scene involving death and destruction. But rather than at a railroad siding in central New Jersey or a battlefield in a rural corner of Pennsylvania, we are in a garden some two thousand years ago and almost half a world away to observe the tears and sense the deep sorrow of one of Jesus’ closest followers- Mary Magdalene. Now we’re not told what Mary was thinking about as she came to the Garden Tomb to maintain her OWN vigil. I imagine she relived much of her ministry with Jesus, recalling to mind some of his miracles and better known teachings. But it was probably the last few days which had to have been MOST bewildering to her, how the week had begun with her Lord being hailed by everyone as their new king, entering Jerusalem to the cries of “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” and then how those same crowds would be shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!” only a few days later. How could such a thing have happened? Where did it all go wrong? Had her last three years with Jesus actually been just a dream and NO MORE? The sorrow and despair she felt in her breast had to have been total.

Mary arrived at the tomb while it was still dark so she could be alone with her dear friend and teacher. However, to her horror, she discovers that the stone which had sealed the entranceway had been rolled away and the body inside was now gone. She had to have wondered, “Who could have done such a thing and where was his body.” In her fear and confusion, she immediately rushes back into the city to inform the others of what she has seen. Peter and John are the first to hear of it and they race to the scene as quickly as they can. They TOO had to be asking themselves, “Who could have done such a thing and WHY? Could the Pharisees have been behind this?”

Anxious and perplexed, the two disciples head for home leaving Mary--who had returned

to the tomb with them--alone to her thoughts and sorrow. For her, this garden had become HER Gethsemane, HER crucifixion- a moment of utter loss and abandonment and despair. Still unable to believe that Jesus' body is gone, Mary has to take one last look inside the tomb. However, to her astonishment, she sees something that Peter and John had NOT for sitting on the ledge where Jesus' body was placed were now two angels dressed in white. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask her. "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." Mary is apparently SO numb, SO bound up in her personal grief, that she's really unable to react to the presence of two strange figures in what had been only moments before an empty tomb. That's when a THIRD figure approaches from behind and addresses her with those same words, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Blinded by her own tears, she mistakes the stranger to be the GARDENER and implores of him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

What I find so amazing here is that Mary's love for Jesus is SO great that she'd be satisfied merely having his dead body to hold onto, to just to be able to caress and protect his pierced, lifeless corpse. Some years ago, a couple of friends and I took a trip to Europe where we visited the Vatican and toured St. Peter's Basilica; that's where Michelangelo's famed marble masterpiece--the "Pieta"--remains on display. It depicts Mary, the mother of Jesus, cradling ever so gently the body of her dead son, beholding him with that look of infinite sorrow mixed with love. But what is interesting is that if you look closely at his hands, the veins on them are STILL raised meaning that there's STILL blood pressure, that there's STILL blood coursing through them- hence, the implication there's STILL LIFE in his body. Now Michelangelo was not denying that Jesus ever died, only that there was something animating about Mary's love, something life-giving about a relationship SO special that only a mother can understand. Like Mary Magdalene, the mother of our Lord would have given everything she owned to hold her beloved son once more, dead OR alive- such is a mother's love.

But then love is LIKE that, isn't it. My father was only 57 years old when he passed away forty-six years ago this month. When I think back to that time, I don't think I ever felt greater love or compassion for my mother than after we had arrived at the funeral parlor for his initial viewing. We came a half an hour early as is customary for families to do. We then walked into the room where dad was laid out, looking ever so handsome in his dark blue suit. Mom went straight over to the casket and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she began to kiss his face and run her fingers through his curly hair as though he was merely sleeping. It didn't matter whether her husband, her lover, her best friend for over a quarter of a century was alive or dead because deep, abiding love doesn't recognize such distinctions, does it.

At that moment, Jesus reveals himself to her by simply pronouncing her name- "Mary." Without even asking how it was possible or what had happened to him, she instinctively falls down before him and begins clutching at his feet in devotion and adoration. But Jesus fends her off; he doesn't accept her love. Instead, he tells her in the most forceful of terms, "Mary, you must stop CLINGING to me!" Now in some translations, these words are translated "Do not touch me" but that's NOT what Jesus is saying here. After all, he asked Thomas to "touch" him in the Upper Room. Rather, he IS telling her, "Mary, you can't CLING to me as though I were the only person in the world who could love or support or care for you. For three years now, I

have been the sole focus of your attention, your affection, and all your energies. But now, all that has to change. I am going to the Father and I'll no longer be there at your side. But I will not leave you comfortless for in my place, I am sending my Spirit and He will not only ACCOMPANY you but BE IN YOUR HEART so that I will be even MORE present, MORE intimate to you than I am now in my current form." Jesus is thus directing her eyes away from his physical presence (which is limited) to his SPIRITUAL presence (which will be in her life and is unlimited). Through his Spirit, she will have permanent spiritual communion with him. The separation that she had experienced over the past three days will only be a memory. He would never again leave or be separated from her, EVER.

On this Easter morning, I would like to leave you with TWO very important proposals. The FIRST is that *life cannot be lived in the past but only in the present*. At some point, we need to put the past behind us and move on with life; we need to leave behind the dead with all its paralyzing force and get on with the ministry we were originally called to do. Jesus once said that "God is a god of the living and not the dead." He told his disciples to "let the dead bury the dead," that they were to go instead and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Jesus is concerned about one thing and one thing ONLY- in LIFE and in the LIVING. He is concerned about people and their lives only in the PRESENT, in the here and now and NOT in the past where guilt and fear and sorrow are rooted. It is only in the PRESENT that one EXPERIENCES JOY or FINDS HOPE or DISCOVERS LOVE. The PRESENT- THAT'S where Christ is and where we OURSELVES must go if we would experience his presence and feel his joy. I cannot emphasize enough that life cannot be lived in the past- it can ONLY be lived NOW, IN THE PRESENT!

Although it might seem like common sense that life can't be lived EXCEPT in the present, it is a fact that many Christians remain trapped in the cold, dark gloom of Good Friday and never FULLY experience the hope and joy and new life that comes with Easter Sunday. They're stuck amid the shadows of the past and can't move from out of it into the bright light of a new future, like one member of my family who has slept beside the cremated ashes of her husband and two of her children every night for the past twenty-five years because it continues to give her some solace that they are still near. Sometimes it's easier to cling to the death of one we love than to turn and reinvest in those who are still living. Of course, it's certainly normal for ALL of us to experience SOME degree of sadness in our lives, but unfortunately many people will turn it into a lifelong OBSESSION. The problem is that obsessive grief can stunt one's emotional and spiritual life; it can render persons incapable of looking beyond themselves to so many other relationships and needs that are around them.

This thus leads me to my SECOND point: *Love is not meant to be hoarded but rather SHARED or it is not REAL love, that is, love on the order that CHRIST desires for us to experience*. Jesus is telling Mary that with his new presence soon to be in her through his Holy Spirit, she will be led into NEW degrees of self-discovery and DEEPER levels of compassion than she had ever experienced before. With this new deep and boundless passion and compassion, Mary's affections will no longer be reserved just for Jesus but will then be freely shared with the OTHER disciples, with those who are feeling lost, abandoned, and unloved THEMSELVES. She must go to them and fill them with all the love and hope she is quite capable of giving, ESPECIALLY in this time when they need it most. And after she has

ministered to THEM, after she has recharged their faith and regenerated their hope with the news that their Lord LIVES, then she must EXPAND her love EVEN FURTHER. She must go to the lost and lonely and loveless all around her, even as SHE was before Jesus had met HER. In the same manner that he reached out and opened his heart to HER, so she must do the same to OTHERS now.

Therefore Jesus gives her this command, "Go now to my brethren and say to them that I ascend to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God." With these words, Jesus is pulling Mary out of herself, out of her deep inner world of fear and grief and despair, and directing her back into the world AT LARGE, back among the needs and concerns of people everywhere where all TRUE disciples belong. Now was not the time for grief or resignation; it was NOT the moment to shroud herself in a cloak of sorrow and self-pity. Rather, her commission was to return to the others and deliver the wondrous news that he, Jesus, is ALIVE, that the bonds of death may have DETAINED him but they could never HOLD him. Being obedient, in her joy, she immediately departs for the Upper Room to inform the others of what she has seen.

My friends, the reality is that as Jesus comforted Mary in her anguish and in her grief, so does he promise to be with US whenever we find OURSELVES lonely or broken or fearful or even doubting. Whenever we find OURSELVES within our OWN "Garden of Gethsemane" even as she found herself in HERS, Christ promises to remain ever faithful. And if we listen closely—both trustingly and prayerfully--in those moments we TOO shall be able hear him call OUR names and summon US from out of OURSELVES, from out of our OWN inner world of private hurts and personal disappointments to send us back INTO the world where OTHER victims just like ourselves reside. Like Mary, we TOO must bring THEM the "good news"- that JESUS CHRIST IS ALIVE, that he has RISEN from the grave, and because he HAS, death and sorrow and fear and loneliness and despair NO LONGER have any power over us. Friends, Easter HAS just such a power in our lives- if only we will LET it. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, fill us all with a deeper sense of your abiding love. Help us to lay aside anything that may hinder our faith and blind us from your immediate presence in us and in our every situation. May we become conduits of your love that others may experience that SAME joy and peace that only comes through a relationship with you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.