

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 24, 2011

Easter Sunday (8:30 am)

SCRIPTURES: John 20:1-18

“A matter of courage . . .”

Before I begin this sermon I would like to read just two more verses from the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of John. These verses close the chapter and the first edition of the book of John, the twenty-first chapter added by a later editor.

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (NRSV)*

I want you to imagine yourself for a moment as a part of the early Christian church, a church in this case quite possibly founded by the disciple of Jesus named John, a church which seems, in the creation of the gospel of John, to have given tremendous honor to John and also to Mary Magdalene (as evidenced by important the role that both play in the resurrection story read today and in the entire gospel. As a gathered fellowship of believers you have heard stories about Jesus and have created this gospel so that others might read your accounts of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and, in reading those accounts that you have recorded, might believe that Jesus is the Christ. And then, of course, your final wish of the community is that in their belief they might have new life in His name.

Imagine that amongst the stories you have heard and told, in fact primary in those stories heard and told and recorded in the Gospel is the story that a man was witnessed to have been executed and then witnessed again after his execution as living and breathing in some fully animated form. Do you not think that this sort of assertion, an assertion that your whole fellowship rests upon, would not have taken an unbelievable amount of courage to proclaim?

What I personally find even more astounding is that the accounts given in the Gospel of John are not glamorized at all; in fact the accounts found in all the gospels are pretty earthy and very plain, full of hesitation and missteps and even doubt, unbelief on the part of the disciples. If I wanted to convince someone of something in this day and age, I'd ship my story to the best New York City ad agency that I could find. I'd let them put a good spin on it, you know, spiff it up a bit, make it worthy of a full page glossy piece in the latest edition of Newsweek. All the characters in my account would be absolutely sure of themselves. They would have understood immediately and completely every subtle facet of the resurrection. The resurrection itself would

be worthy of Hollywood Oscars for cinematography and acting (and maybe even for my directing talents!). And that is exactly what many Christians of this age do, as I witnessed when I looked over page after page of bulletin covers that could be used on Easter Sunday. Christ was often floating above earth with a bright halo or corona. There were unrealistic depictions of tombs, usually with blinding light pouring out them and surrounded by blooming flowers. Angels, usually in female form, and always with enormous wings seemed to be floating around somewhere. And none these things are actually described by the gospels, especially by the gospel of John. For me, it is the plainness of the text, the uncertainty and the doubt, the foot races to the tomb, the lack of understanding, even Mary's misidentification of Jesus as the gardener that make the story that much more believable; just as I tend suspect stories about anything that are too clean, too spectacular, too certain.

And here we are this morning, gathered together to hear the story one more time. And I find myself, as have found myself time and time again over the past thirty years, with very much the same task that the writer (or writers) of the Gospel of John had in the first century. I find myself telling you this story, a story that I have received from those who have told it to me throughout my life, the story as it was recorded, for my sake and for yours, centuries and centuries ago. I tell you this story, I share the story as it was told by the Johannine community, so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in believing you might have life in His name.

This past Thursday, as our Thursday morning Bible Study group looked over the Gospel lesson read today, we walked through the study of specific Greek words found in the text. We noted that the word that was used in the passage to be clearly translated into English as "to see" also popped up on two occasions in the midst of the text translated into English as "to know". Assumption in the times of classical Greek, in the time of the early Christian Church, was that to see something was also to know that thing. Friends, the Johannine Church was given the assurance through stories passed down from those eye witnesses that even though they could no longer physically "see" Christ personally, they could, through the assurance of the Church "know" their Resurrected Lord.

To this day we who do not have the benefit of eye witness sightings of Christ continue to be reminded and assured through the Gospels, through the sacraments such as we will share today and through the words of those who precede us, that Christ is Lord. We live in a jaded,

mistrustful, doubting world, my friends; a world in which politics and economics, society and media and entertainment are all overrun and rife with embellishment and spectacle, and even outright lies, to the point that real truth is difficult find and discern. It is important that we find something, some truth, in which we can anchor our minds and our hearts, so that we will not be cast about in the stormy seas of this age. I would, with whatever courage I can muster, propose to you that the writings of this community of faith, gathered nearly two thousand years ago, hold that truth; written down from stories that themselves had been meticulously repeated from those who were eye witnesses. They were ordinary folk, like you and like me, who found themselves in the midst of an extraordinary set of circumstances and events.

So let us together, courageously embrace this Gospel account. Let us embrace the memorial sacrament that is before us. Let us embrace the assurance of Christ Jesus, dead and buried and risen again. And let us set this truth at center of our lives, that we may live to Christ, that we may die to Christ, that in Christ we may find new life in God's heavenly house that is forever.

Amen.