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The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day
April 4, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 20:1-18

Crossing over from Good Friday to Easter seems a bit less surreal today than was the case last year. We certainly recall the rather unsatisfying observance of The Great Three Days during lockdown, as well as the sacrifice and uncertainty brought on by the times. We ended up observing what seemed to be a year-long Lent -- an extended fast with not very much feast. Speaking personally, I recall that, after the "virtual" Easter Sunday service last year, I ate lunch and headed to my couch to watch TV; sports programming, in particular, was very limited. For example, ESPN broadcasted a rerun of the 1999 National Spelling Bee.

I'm not kidding...

But we remember the sacrifices we make, in both hard times and easy times. For me, such remembrance helps to strike a balance between Good Friday's crucifixion and Easter Sunday's resurrection...between, one might say, fast and feast. And I attempt to remember both, although sometimes my Good Fridays end up giving me more vivid memories. Literally. I can think of one occasion several years ago, early afternoon on Good Friday, when I needed to run some errands, and, of course, I wanted to stop for lunch. Wanting also to uphold my longstanding discipline of meatless Good Fridays, I walked into a local fast food joint and didn't see a lot of options; this was surprising for a little North Dakota town

with a strong presence of Roman Catholics. So, what did I end up ordering?

Fish sticks. It was one of the worst meals I ever had in my life!

Speaking in terms of liturgical observance, I suppose one could say that was the point. If it allowed me to enjoy the Easter feast all the more that year, then it worked!

The Church has attempted, through the ways in which services for Holy Week and Easter are structured, to offer a unified journey through the Passion, death, and resurrection of Christ; this is why we speak of The Great Three Days -- Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter -- as if they are one observance stretched out over a 72-hour period. As an encouragement to everyone who wishes to get the full effect, spiritually and emotionally, of this most holy occasion, I would recommend taking part in the entirety of The Great Three Days in whatever ways possible, if you have not done so previously.

Easter is, in many ways, a completion of Christ's passage through suffering and death and on to resurrection; the Church speaks of this passage as the Paschal Mystery, and incorporates a number of death-to-life motifs into its services this time of year. The remembrance of our Baptism, which we have in today's liturgy, is one notable example; Baptism itself is dying and rising, with our old selves being put to death in the drowning waters and our new selves emerging from the waters to life in Christ. Indeed, we are joined to Christ's death and resurrection in Baptism; in our case,

the old, sinful self dies and the new, regenerated self rises. As we renew our baptismal vows this morning, let us die to sin and rise to new life once again...

The Paschal Mystery, however, originates from Christ's own death-to-resurrection passage, and today our attention is drawn to the empty tomb. The first Easter was, in some ways, an occasion of bewilderment and confusion, especially if we stop reading after the first couple verses of John, chapter 20. In today's Gospel, we read, "[Mary Magdalene] ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him'" (John 20:2). What we have here is an empty tomb, and a lot of uncertainty as to how it got that way; Mary assumed that there had been some grave robbing going on. Understandably, she is distraught, but she sticks around long enough to see how things turn out.

When Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, though, she doesn't recognize him right away. Instances of the post-resurrection Jesus being mistaken for someone else are not unique to the Gospel of John, however. The Gospel of Luke mentions that "[the disciples'] eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16) when he began to walk with them to Emmaus. And later on in John, chapter 20, we read of Jesus' ability to appear in rooms where doors have been locked, so, obviously, something is different about Jesus after the resurrection.

In his book, The Challenge of Jesus, N.T. Wright states that the

Gospels present the resurrection as "an event for which there was no precedent and of which there remains as yet no subsequent example, an event involving neither the resuscitation nor the abandonment of a physical body, but its transformation into a new mode of physicality" (p. 146). We could conclude, then, that Jesus is the same...but different. After the resurrection, it is not Jesus' former body reanimated that people are seeing; rather, it is something of a completely different order -- changed, but not totally incomprehensible.

That said, it is now possible to view Mary Magdalene a bit more sympathetically when she encounters Jesus outside the empty tomb. However, her little faux pas bears repeating; the text says, "Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away'" (John 20:15b). He's right there, and she thinks he's the gardener! But this is actually a recurring theme in the Gospel of John; Jesus is misunderstood before he is recognized for who he is. And obviously, something about him has changed in order for his longtime companions to not recognize him here.

But Mary Magdalene's persistence and determination is remarkable. She will do anything to find what she believes to be Jesus' missing body. But right at that moment, Jesus calls her name...and that's the pivotal moment of this Easter story. It is known in the Gospel of John that the shepherd calls the sheep by name and they recognize his voice (John 10:11ff.). And you see what happens here; Mary exclaims, "Rabbouni," and all the bewilderment and

confusion of the first Easter dissipates. Now it is time to proclaim the good news!

Mary Magdalene then becomes the first witness to the resurrection; she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18b), and shares what had happened in her encounter with the Resurrected One. For us, the joy she now experiences maybe seems unduly delayed...after all, who wouldn't be delighted to discover that one's Lord had been raised? But that's a kind of cognitive bias; we judge people in the past according to what we know now. Looking at the text, Jesus' resurrection was not self-evident upon the discovery of the empty tomb, especially if one wasn't paying attention when Jesus talked about dying and rising on the third day. Thus, we need a little imaginative identification with the text and the situation to get a feel for the bewilderment and confusion of the resurrection's first witnesses.

But just as every Good Friday carries forward into Easter, so too does the bewilderment and confusion of the first Easter give way to the joyous proclamation of the resurrection. We, too, have traversed some very dark hours and find ourselves ready to burst forth with shouts of "Alleluia; Christ is risen," and with triumphant hymns of praise to the Resurrected One. And, to be quite honest, we never got to "finish" the season of Lent in 2020; instead, we had what seemed like a year-long Lent due to the pandemic and to the restrictions placed upon our worship. And we are here now, able to do a lot of things that we'll hopefully never take for granted again...like gathering in-person, singing, and

receiving the Eucharist.

For many of us, today is a day in which we're vividly experiencing the resurrection. It is, on this occasion, both Christ's resurrection and, in some ways, a resurrection for our church. We've been granted a glimpse of some of the things we've missed (singing, in particular) and, as we may have already sensed, it can be difficult to contain our joy under the circumstances. But that is the risk we take when we taste the glory of the Lord and move with the Holy Spirit. Some have called this the sensation of "God-sparks" -- kind of like a shiver down your spine or goose pimples -- and it's perfectly okay to have!

Among the many kinds of good news one could share today, I leave you with this opportunity we have this morning to experience joy...joy as Mary Magdalene finally felt after her encounter with the risen Christ, and joy as we finally feel after what seemed like a year-long Lent. We still have, at the core of our Christian faith, the resurrection, meaning that there is no death that cannot lead to everlasting life, no sin that cannot lead to redemption, and no wound (metaphorical or otherwise) that cannot lead to healing. If there's anything that could ever bring me joy in times like these, it's those very realities. And they are realities thanks to the One who made them so -- God, through his Son Jesus Christ.

May the agony of our collective Good Friday give way to the joy of this blessed Easter. Amen.