

Easter Sunday 2017

John 20: 1-18

Grace and peace to you... from God our Father and our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

I've shared with some of you that my experience of this last week, leading up to this morning, is deeper and more vital given the time Teri and I spent in Israel and Jerusalem this past month.

The holy sites in Jerusalem have long been highly contested, and are therefore highly regulated. The holy sites are covered with church structures that have been built and razed, and built again over centuries. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher sits inside the walls that define the "old city" of Jerusalem. In Jesus time this site was just outside the city walls. The drama that has drawn us here this morning took place in this space, about the size of a baseball diamond. That's how close the place of execution was to the place of burial. According to biblical scholar John J. Killigan,

"If these **man-made** elements could be removed we would stand between two places not more than 30 yards [90 feet] apart, with dirt and rock and grass under our feet and the open air all around us."

I had a curious mix of feelings being in this space. The place is weighed down with lamps and gold leaf. Icons, holy images, gaze out at pilgrims from grey limestone walls. Pilgrims mingle with tourists who give way to processions of monks doing their daily devotionals.

The site of the tomb is covered by a vault, recently restored. It's a marble structure that is open today, again, to the public. When we saw it was guarded by a, sober almost scary looking, monk who barred the entrance so none could go near. There's a part of me that feels sad at how buried the site is in centuries of religious culture and symbolism. And yet another part of me felt a subtle moving of my spirit as I stood in the place where time, and death, and life were changed, transformed forever on that morning we celebrate today.

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15: 54-55)

Our resurrection celebration today is a much safer, comfortable, scripted, predictable affair than on that first day of the week so long ago. And we come here this morning for a reasons much different than those early morning visits we have read about in the Gospel. We may be here for (or because of) family, or because it's what you do on this day, or because we're in the choir or because we love to sing hymns and Hallelujahs. Many here may in fact be doubtful or vaguely bemused about the whole of this, not sure what it has do with life as we know it.

For Mary Magdalen, Peter or the disciples, none of whom had likely been sleeping much or well, this morning was a much different affair. So far as Peter and those that remained of Jesus followers were concerned, with Jesus dead, all was lost. They were not only grieved, but in fear for their own lives. This was not a fear that passed easily, as we shall see later.

Mary goes to visit the grave to grieve, not find an empty tomb. Her grief and fear is only compounded by the agonizing thought that someone has stolen the body. She runs away to look for help and support.

When Peter arrives, he and the other disciple hardly understand what they see inside the tomb. They together are stunned and confused, and can only return home. In her grief, fear and confusion Mary, who has remained behind has no idea what has happened, even when confronted by messengers from God. And when she does encounter Jesus, she doesn't even recognize him.

How true this is for me sometime. I can be standing right in front of what God wants me to see, to be about, and look right through it. I'm sure this is true for you as well.

All that changes when Jesus calls "Mary". What a powerful moment. She hears her name and sees the truth. In that instant, Mary is transformed from a disheartened, broken, grief stricken soul into Jesus first witness and proclaimer of this amazing news, "He is not here, he has risen." Fear, grief and despair are wiped away.

But now, says the LORD— the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. (Isaiah 43: 1)

The figure on the wall behind me is a sculpture of the risen Jesus completed by sculptor Thorsten Sigstedt for Atonement in 1957. It is the image of Christus Victor. Christ the victor. The question this morning is: "What is this victory and what has it to do with you and me?"

Let's look first at what Jesus says of himself. Jesus speaking of his ministry said..., (I) have come to serve and give (my) life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10: 45) I'll bet you didn't realize you are captive. Who, or what is it that holds your life captive - that "kidnaps" and holds your life hostage. Surely it is not God, since God loves you dearly and desires only life for you.

Death is the culprit here. It is death, or our fear of death, that makes life out to be a cold meaningless one way ticket to eternal nothingness. Our fear of death seduces us into all manner of denial, and avoidance, and self-delusion. Death sets our empty hearts seeking after things, or thrills, or mind numbing experiences in hopes of dulling the fear and avoiding emptiness.

Jesus life is a life lived full, in service to others. Our fullest life is also lived full when we live it in service to others. Jesus lived life so fully that when it came time to give it up he grieved deeply. It seems to me that Jesus, awakening from death that morning, must have been as filled with joy, wonder and thanks giving as will you on that day when you see God face to face.

What we celebrate here today is nothing less that Jesus Christ's defeat of death, once, and for all, without distinction. This most precious ransom was paid for you... and God, just so no one misses the point, affirms that self-giving, self-sacrificing act with a spectacular victory. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

So, regardless of the reason you came here this morning, know this. Jesus has destroyed death, and you... each of you... has been freed from your own death sentence. Breathe in your new life with each alleluia we sing.

Now, how shall we go out from here today? I hope, not just home. Because Christ has won for you - for all of us - a victory over death, go home freed to live your life honestly and fully. And what does this look like you ask? The Apostle Paul points a way forward in this way.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3)

And let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, now and forever. Amen.