



The Reverend Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Sermon
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
John 20:1-18

I speak to you in the name of the living God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was my first Sunday here at Christ Church. I had started just a few days prior, had met a few folks, and had mentioned that on Sundays I like to arrive early - like really early - and I'd been told, "Well, go ahead, but no one will be here to greet you." That was okay with me. Coming in early was a respite from a rather boisterous household, a time to hear myself think, and to pray.

That morning at the end of October, 2018, it was indeed very early when I pulled in. The sky was violet and fuchsia; dawn was just breaking. My eyes followed the first rays of light glinting up off of the magnificent bell tower. Lost in thought already, I jolted, "Wait, how do I get in? Ah, right" and walked toward the side door at the entrance to the columbarium...when I saw a man. His back was toward me. He was dressed all in white and kneeling down, working in the flower bed along the wall. I did not recognize him.

I paused, astonished. I know a story like this--the one we just heard, where Mary Magdalene is in the garden where her friend Jesus had been laid to rest in a tomb just a couple days before. It was early on a Sunday; dawn was just breaking. She had risen in the darkness to come here, to spend some quiet time as close to Jesus as she could get, knowing that a large stone separated them.

When she arrived and saw that the stone had been rolled away, and that his body was not there, she was terrified and enraged and she sprinted back to her friends, shrieking breathlessly, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." This is what they had been afraid of, and why they had been so grateful to Joseph of Arimathea for donating the large tomb, the humongous stone preventing theft of his body. They knew there were some people out there who felt so threatened by Jesus' very being and his words and actions in the community that they may well have wanted to rob his body from the grave.

Peter and the beloved disciple raced over - literally (it is noted that the beloved disciple won) - and they, too, found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, which would point to his body having been stolen. However, very, very strangely, his white linen burial clothes were there, the cloth around the head folded and set neatly to the side. Grave robbers, even if they had been able to roll the stone away, would not have left the clothes there, much less folded them. Something new, something strange, was at hand.

Mary is crying so much, her body wracked with grief and her eyes are blurred by tears, we don't know if she notices the linens, but she can't help but see angels sitting at either side of where the body was supposed to have been. She wails to them, incredulous, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know

where they have laid him.” Like, “Don’t just sit there, do something!” She wheels around to look for more help, and, possibly without even looking up all the way, sees a man whom she assumes to be a gardener, who in some tellings is dressed all in white, and cries, “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take care of him.”

He says, “Mary” -- and recognizing him, she flings her arms around him, clutches him for dear life, soaks him in her tears again - tears of joy and relief.

Yet he says, “Do not hold onto me. I am ascending to the Father. This is new life.” In this tender admonition, Jesus instructs that this new life is not what was. That there is no going back to normal. That resurrection is not resuscitation. That his body - and their relationship, and community - are changed, but not ended.

That Mary is to tell what she has seen: that when her eyes were blurred with tears, her heart locked in the darkness of grief, Jesus showed up, to her, in Love that had stripped them both of death. In Love that had burst out of that tomb.

In Love that will never ask us to ignore our pain, or bury our grief, or shut down our doubt, but look for God right in it. In Love that sees us when we are laid bare, and does not look away. In Love that speaks tenderly, and calls us to act and to change. In Love that will not let us stay the same.

Beloved, this past year has felt like an endless Lent, an interminable Good Friday, and an eternal Holy Saturday, all rolled into one, every day, and it also is an unending Easter. As Mary Magdalene longed to hold onto Jesus, many of us long to go back to exactly how it was before, yet we practice resurrection when we accept that the former days, our previous normal, have passed away. We practice resurrection when we recognize how we have changed. We practice resurrection when we spend quiet time listening for the Lord; when we cry, when we look for and insist upon God to show up, beyond our wildest imagination; when we do not expect too little of God.

That October Sunday at dawn, at this church named for no one else but Christ, I did think, when I saw the man dressed all in white working in the garden, that it could be Jesus. I laughed at that possibility, but it wouldn’t be beyond God! Nothing is beyond God.

It turned out to be KaClarence, our groundskeeper and now facilities manager, who was planting bulbs that we would enjoy in the spring.

Yet, that story stays with me, and I share it with you on this Easter Day, for God can and will do anything. If our eyes are open, we may just see him. Christ is risen. Alleluia, alleluia!