

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Easter

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O come! in this sweet morning hour. Feed me with food divine; And fill with all Thy love and power This worthless heart of mine.

That one word which sets in motion my victory lap. The past couple of days have been incredibly difficult for my friend. Life had taken a rather awful turn. She lost everything that she had worked for and looked forward to. She told me her story. What led to where she was right now and all the emotions that were bubbling within her. In a way, I wish I could do something to help her. But I couldn't do much. As we sat in silence, we both found ourselves staring at the floor upon which our feet sat. Sometimes you just can't do much than to star. Sometimes you simply can't offer much than to be present with others.

After our time together, when she departed, I picked the Bible to read and offer myself some reassuring words. I opened to John 20 and that was when I realized who she this woman was and what she'd been looking at all along. She was Mary Magdalene, and she's been looking deep into the darkness of the empty tomb. She's been looking into the tomb because it is the closest that she can get to the man she called Rabbi. She had been with this Rabbi who called her, restored her and offered a new life of purpose and meaning. Yes, she lived on the margins of society, she was one who was used and abused by men both great and small. And then she chanced upon a man who invited her to look at life in a different way. And she did, and when she did, she came upon the realization that her life was worth more than she could ever bargain for. And for that reason, she followed him.

She's followed up until now, this moment, it's been three days since they took her new song away from her. She cannot sing. She's cried more than she had ever cried in her life. Behind her lies the temptation and attraction of a former life which was meaningless at best. Mary gazes into the darkness and there's nothing to see but waste, indignity, horror, loss, cruelty, disgrace and despair. Mary looks into the deep darkness of the tomb, that tomb which makes mockery of the fleeting parade of our lives, the tomb which awakens us to the desolation that often comes with being alive. Right here, beside the tombs hewn in the hills outside the walls of Jerusalem is the paradox of all our lives: the wonder of fertility, the beauty and vibrancy of creation on the one hand, and the everlasting darkness of doomed death on the other.

The eternal question is, wherein lies the ultimate truth? Between the vibrancy of creation and the darkness of death, wherein lies the truth? There's only one word which sets in motion my victory lap.

But wait. Mary can hear someone whisper that morning has broken like the first morning, she can hear the Blackbird speak like the first bird, she can feel her feet wet from the dew, and she can see the rising sun beyond the horizon. In that moment of total dejection as she looked towards the darkness of the tomb, she hears that one word which she had

known all her life-her own name. 'Mary.' The one who is looking into the darkness of a world without God suddenly hears the word, that one word which changes everything. That one word which turns our mourning into dancing, sadness into joy, grief into laughter, despair into hope and darkness into light. Mary lightened up when she heard her name. Yes, "I am the Good shepherd" he says. I know my sheep and I call them by their name. That one word which sets in motion my victory lap.

Easter, if you like, asks some strange questions, what is your name? What name do others call you? Do you ever hear the teacher call your name? What has so drawn you away from the teacher? What imprisons you? What diminishes you? Like Mary, you are suffocating with the disbelief of what's going on in the garden. And you hear your name, but you are so overwhelmed with your despondency that you cannot even begin to make sense of what's going on. And so you do the most simple and humble, yet most transformative turn you can ever make in your life, like Mary, you turn round to behold the Rabbi who calls you by name because He knows your name. And hearing your name is that one word which sets in motion your victory lap.

Within Mary's turn and our turn, we experience the whole gospel. Jesus is Adam, the first man, meeting Eve in the garden, and simply asking Eve, could we please start this again? Jesus is Abraham, the embodiment of God's covenant with Israel, meeting Sarah, and asking her, 'Could we go on a new journey and become a true blessing to the world?' Jesus is Moses, the liberator, meeting Miriam, and asking, 'Could we begin our long walk to freedom?' Like Mary, we also turn from horror to elation, from depression to joy, from abyss to glory. A few moment ago, death engulfed everything. Now, Mary is inhabiting a story of new beginnings, new blessings, and a new sense of belonging. It often takes one word. And Henry Baker in his poem "I Am Not Worthy, Holy Lord", writes this:

I am not worthy, holy Lord,
That Thou shouldst come to me;
Speak but the word; one gracious word
Can set the sinner free.

Baker knew that there's only one word which sets in motion our victory lap, one word which sets us free. And so he invites the Lord to speak that one word. Call me by my name. Assure me that you know my name. And that gracious assurance may be the only way that I can be free.

Being set free from her hopelessness, sadness and misery, she reaches out to embrace the risen Rabbi. She celebrates, she rejoices, she shares the wonder. Think about every embrace you've ever known: the cuddle of a child, the reassurance of a friend, the greeting of a companion, the ecstasy of a lover, the consolation of a sympathizer and the strength of a rescuer. The embrace of Mary is the definitive embrace of all time: Mary meets her maker, redeemer and the one who empowers her, above all she meets her Rabbi. Every time we hug someone we are reminding them of this most important hug of all. This is the touch of life, hope in the face of death, solidarity in the midst of bewilderment, reunion after trauma and tenderness overcoming isolation. That one word that changes every aspect of our lives and grants us victory over death and anything else.

Mary embraces her Rabbi and wouldn't let go. But then she hears the Rabbi upend her grip on him. Don't hold on to me. I am here for you just as much as I am here for everyone. Don't reduce love to the intensity of the moment, don't restrict the glory to just you and me. The point is I can only run when I am free. And within that embrace Mary discovers her true freedom as she hears the Rabbi invite her to go, go and tell my brothers.

She who was powerless, pitiful and dejected is now purposeful, focused and energized. Her task now is to tell. She has news to share, she's seen the glory of God, and she has truth to share. The news she has to share with the brothers and the world is one of Christ overcoming death, the glory she has seen is one of Christ pulling all of creation from hell and the question of wherein lies the truth of human life has been answered for her. The truth lies in the vibrancy of creation and death cannot supplant the creative purposes of God.

Our question this Easter morning is, how long can you stare at the bare floor? How long can you stare in the darkness of an empty tomb? The Rabbi is calling your name, but you are so focused on your hopelessness that you cannot even hear him. Easter's invitation is to allow yourself to be a resurrection story-a victory out of the prison in which you are trapped to a new kind of life. Allow yourself to hear that one word which sets in motion your victory lap.

So here are three Easter words for you to consider. Turn. Touch. Go. Turn-from despair to joy. To turn is to realize that despair and hopelessness aren't the last word, and that by being absorbed by them you're missing the gentle presence behind you. To touch- to know that your longing to be held, loved and embraced are met, is only a part of your deeper calling to share the joy of God with all of God's children. To go-to find life in good work, bringing reconciliation, healing, truth and discovery to those who are beset by grief, bitterness and hurt.

The compelling narrative of the Easter story is that nothing divine can die. That is why I know the Rabbi calls your name and my name, for he is alive. It is good to be alive. Alleluia Christ is Risen. Amen.