

Easter Day 2020 SSP online

St. John 20:1-18

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I'm Fr Andrew Mead, interim rector of Saint Stephen's, like you confined to my home, in my case down in Narragansett. My wife Nancy is recording this Easter sermon in the garden, truly the Lord's and her garden, in the yard where the daffodils and bluebells are making their early appearances on the heels of the snowdrops a month ago followed by the crocuses. Lilies, if they survive the night visits of the deer, are still to come. The garden follows the rhythm of the Lord's Easter appearances in the Gospels.

Our Gospel from Saint John is a scene in the garden of Jesus's tomb featuring among others the Lord and Mary Magdalene. All four Gospels name Mary Magdalene as one of the women who went to the tomb to mourn and to care for Jesus's body. The Scriptures do not tell us the details but say that Mary was healed by the Lord of evil spirits that had vexed and possessed her. For that she was deeply devoted to Jesus. Her weeping over his death strikes a chord with others who grieve the loss of a loved one. More particularly Mary's discovery of Jesus's open, empty tomb and the absence of his body made the loss much more upsetting. We cling to the remains and tokens of our loved ones.

- I recall a friend grieving the loss of his wife. "Andy, she is SO GONE." He couldn't bear to move anything that was hers, not even the post-its she had stuck on the refrigerator.
- A year after my own dad died, Mom and I attempted to do something about his clothes, his suits and jackets, in the attic. When you picked them up and put them to your face, the slight, familiar beloved scent of Dad was there; it was so evocative of his presence.

Mary Magdalene ran in distress to Peter and John: “They have taken the Lord away and we do not know where they have laid him.” [We recall the tomb was a gift of the secret disciple Joseph of Arimathea; perhaps “they” were Joseph and Nicodemus...or, perish the thought, perhaps “they” were the temple guards...?] Mary and the other women were going to finish the anointing interrupted by the onset of the Sabbath. They would have, like all of us, made something of a shrine of Jesus’s tomb.

John, who tells the story, outran Peter to the empty tomb. There were the grave-cloths, with the head wrapping in a place by itself. Peter was perplexed, but John says he saw this and believed. Jesus had forecast his death and resurrection more than once.

After Peter and John left, Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. Surely this was the low point. But then she bent to look into the tomb. There were two angels in white where the body of Jesus had been. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Mary repeated the problem – “They” had taken away the Lord and she didn’t know where. And at this she turned around. There he was, but she didn’t realize. Grief blinded her.

Jesus repeated the angels’ question ‘Woman, why are you weeping,’ adding “Whom are you looking for?” Supposing he was the gardener, Mary said, “Sir, if you have laid him somewhere else, tell me where, and I will take him away...BUT JESUS SAID “MARY.” She turned to him and in Hebrew said “Rabboni,” which means something like “Dear Teacher.” And Jesus prevents her from clutching onto him as she would have. “Do not hold me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father....But go tell the brethren...” And so she did. She told these things. Mary Magdalene was the first to see the Lord risen.

“Do not hold me.” The death and resurrection of Jesus changed his relationship to Mary Magdalene and every other disciple. For Jesus can no longer be held. He will heal Peter of his denials. He will give his kinsman John, the “beloved disciple,” a wider family. He will cure Thomas of his despair. He will convert Saul of Tarsus from an enemy to the premier apostle Paul, who eventually, with Peter, will end his life as a martyr in Rome.

Because Jesus has died and risen from the dead, time and space no longer hold or confine him. The 2000 years since Mary Magdalene are the blink of an eye. He has ascended to the Father where he receives our prayers and from where he sends his blessings because he has the whole world in his hands.

So what about you? You are as immediately present and known to Jesus as Mary Magdalene, though you did not know or see him during his earthly life. We are a bit like Saint Paul, who did not know Jesus in the flesh but was an enemy of his disciples before his conversion. Paul tried first to destroy, then gave his life to build, the church. Saint Stephen’s martyrdom, in which Saul had a hand, no doubt had something to do with his change into a Christian. But what about you? How did you first meet Jesus? ---

- Through the fellowship of the church?
- Through your parents or grandparents, through a friend or neighbor, through a teacher or minister or priest?
- I know someone who met the Lord by reading a novel and realizing that author, whom he venerated, believed and staked his life on the truth of Jesus.
- There are many “means of grace” for the “hope of glory” in Christ. But to conclude...

In this time of the coronavirus isolation we might reflect how the first Easter is somewhat parallel to this one. The first disciples hid behind locked doors for fear of Jesus's enemies coming after them as well. Jesus appeared to them over a period of fifty days, here and there, to one, to some, to many. It wasn't till Pentecost, till the day the Holy Spirit descended from the Father in the power predicted by Jesus, that those frightened little people, led by Peter, broadcast the Good News publicly.

So for now, as we sit at home with our computers hearing the Word online, let's do our best to take it in and spread the news: Jesus lives! He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.