First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

March 31, 2024

John 20:1-18

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. **2**So she 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.” **3**Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. **4**The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5**He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. **6**Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, **7**and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. **8**Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, **9**for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. **10**Then the disciples returned to their homes. **11**But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, **12**and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. **13**They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” **14**When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. **15**Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” **16**Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). **17**Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” **18**Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This year, we’re looking at John’s narration of the resurrection story. I find it fascinating that each of the gospel versions of this foundational event, while sharing many of the same elements, each have some unique perspectives pertaining to the events of that day. In Matthew 28:1-20, we read about a great earthquake where an angel of God comes down from heaven and rolls the stone away from the tomb. In Mark 16-1-8 there’s no angel, just a man dressed in white, who we assume to be an angel, and Jesus doesn’t even make an appearance until verse 9. Luke 24:1-52 combines the resurrection with the story of Jesus appearing to the two men on the road to Emmaus, and then we have John’s version, which is one of my personal favorites.

In today’s reading, Mary Magdalene has gone to the tomb by herself, early Sunday morning, and after seeing the stone had been rolled away, makes an assumption that Jesus’ body had been taken away. She runs and tells Peter who, along with John, take off running to see what’s going on because he, Peter, doesn’t believe what Mary has told him. John, probably younger and in better shape than Peter, gets to the tomb first, but waits until Peter, probably sweaty and out of breath, arrives. When Peter looks inside the tomb, he finds it empty. No angel, no man or men, dressed in white and, more importantly, no body of Jesus, just the burial wrappings. John, seeing the body of Jesus is indeed missing, believes, but not that Jesus was actually resurrected because, as verse 9 of today’s reading tells us, *“For as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”* Then Peter and John up and just go home, leaving a weeping Mary Magdalene behind. Not exactly a caring response to Mary’s grief, but not really surprising, given the culture.

Mary finally takes a look for herself and sees two angels dressed in white, who ask her why is she weeping? Well, duh! C’mon, angels, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? After Mary responds to the angels, she turns and sees Jesus, but mistakes him for the gardener. Jesus asks the same question; woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Mary, still assuming that Jesus is the gardener, replies in verse 13, *“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”*  It’s only after Jesus says Mary’s name, that he is finally recognized.

The question of who do we seek, is more important today than ever before. And I would add that an equally important question, to ask on this holy day, is what are we looking for?

When we seek the resurrected Christ, what, exactly *are* we looking for? Are we looking for a white, blond haired, blue eyed Jesus? Are we seeking a Christ that mirrors our own biases and prejudices? Are we seeking a safe Jesus who doesn’t cause any waves or make any serious demands on us? Or are we seeking a Savior who asks us to look beyond a safe, comfortable salvation, which leaves those who don’t look, act, or love like us behind, seeking instead a Savior who brings salvation to all?

When we see God, embodied in Jesus Christ, as a God who looks like us, acts like us, believes like us, and has the same biases and prejudices as us, then I believe we have missed the whole point of the gospel message.

Who do we seek? Are we willing to humble ourselves, just as Jesus did when he allowed himself to be crucified, in order to bring about God’s kingdom here on earth?

In describing what the crucifixion means for us in the twenty-first century, Australian theologian Dean Johnson writes this:

*Jesus didn’t die so you don’t have to.*

*Jesus died so that you would know how to.*

*Jesus didn’t die instead of you.*

*Jesus died ahead of you.*

*Jesus didn’t rise so that you don’t have to.*

*Jesus rose so that you would be able to*

*Jesus didn’t rise instead of you.*

*Jesus rose ahead of you.*

*Death and resurrection aren’t about substitution, they are about participation.*

*Substitution keeps people in a suspended state of spiritual adolescence. Participation liberates people to fully partake in the divine nature. Jesus said, “Follow me.”*

The Easter story of death and resurrection isn’t about substitution, it’s about participation. For me, this means that we who seek the risen Christ, have an opportunity to experience resurrection for ourselves. We experience resurrection by dying to the sin of bigotry, dying to the sin of hatred, dying to the sin of “us versus them,” and when this happens, we are given the opportunity to be raised up into the joy of a new life, a new way of thinking and being as we join with the risen Christ to bring about the Kingdom of God, not just for ourselves, but for all of God’s creation.

We are called to look beyond our own biases and prejudices. We are called to move beyond the notion of a comfortable, safe version of salvation, which doesn’t require any effort on our part. We are called to be active participants in the glorious message of Easter.

When we stand at the empty tomb, who do we seek? AMEN