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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/23/2008, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

P Christ is risen. Alleluia!
C He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre...(John 20:1, KJV)

Mary Magdalene is spoken of very tenderly in all four Gospels, but it is only in this morning's Gospel, from St. John, that she comes to the tomb alone. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, she is strengthened by the company of the other holy women — the myrrh-bearing women who have come to anoint the body of Jesus. But here, in this morning's Gospel, she is alone.

If one of the other woman had gone with her to the tomb, we could well imagine their conversation along the way.

"Mary, it is still dark. Yon horizon is still in the shadows. The rosy colors of dawn at not even hinted at yet. How long are you meaning to linger at his tomb? I wonder whether you have slept at all. Judging by the dark rings under your eyes, I think no, you have not slept. How long are you meaning to stay, Mary? He is gone. Your lingering will not bring him back."

"How long am I going to stay? Oh, I do not know how long. Probably until I become hungry, except that I can hardly imagine being hungry again. I know that life goes on, and many people have grieved at the graves of their loved ones. But now it is my time to grieve. I'm heading to the tomb of my master. Life seemed so much better when I was with him. Life was more full, more abundant. Maybe being at his tomb, close, you know, to his body... maybe things will seem somewhat better then." So, off she goes in the wee hours of that Sunday morning, to the tomb of Jesus.

But when she arrives, she finds that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb.

There it is, shoved aside. It is a large stone, boulder-like. Under orders of Pilate, the Roman governor, the tomb had been sealed with a stone and made secure. That stone was not supposed to be the moving kind. It was supposed to be substantial and stable, by government order, yet there it is, simply set aside. In the delightful words of St. Matthew, an angel had been at work:

²And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.(Matthew 28:2, KJV)

That doggone stone overreaches itself when it proposes to hold Jesus within. That boulder is out of place trying to seal the tomb of Jesus, and it probably knew it. It was probably glad to have been rolled away from the tomb and to function as a lounge chair for the angel. That would suit stones better, being chairs, instead of trying to seal the tomb of One who cannot be sealed in.

But Mary does not know this at first. She does not know that her master has triumphed over death and kicked the stone aside. All she knows is that the tomb is empty. His body is gone. His dead body would have been a very poor substitute for his life, yet it would have been of some comfort to her. But now it is gone.

She runs to tell the news to the disciples:

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”(John 20:2)

And maybe, delivering that discouraging news would have fulfilled her duty, and she could have wandered on home to breakfast and to bed, only this woman is not done with her work. She hastens back to the cemetery to try to find the body of Jesus.

She sees angels in the tomb, but seems not to care two hoots about them. They sit calmly and respectfully where the body had lain, one at the head and one at the foot, as if honored to simply embrace the space where his body had been. But Mary is not after angels. She is after Jesus.

She sees a gardener, of so she supposes him to be. It is really Jesus, only so strong is the grip of death upon our poor human race, that once it has claimed someone, we imagine never to see that one again. Even though our beloved should stand right before us, we can hardly recognize him, so miserably cruel and strong is the hold of death upon our imaginations.

So, she imagines Jesus to be a gardener. And the request she makes of this gardener is so wonderful, we could well smile with joy at it:

Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.(John 20:15, KJV)

Why, Mary, Child, you can't take him away. What are you thinking? You are just a little slip of a thing. Or even if you are as strong as Samson, still, Jesus is a grown man, plus his body has been wrapped and weighed down with spices, about a hundred pound weight (John

19:39). How are you going to take him away?

No matter. No matter at all to Mary. She will do it. Such is the nature of love that it overcomes things. Mary's confidence here that she will be able to take away the body of Jesus could well put us in mind of a saying of Jesus about faith — about even so small a bit of faith as a mustard seed:

...for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.(Matthew 17:20, KJV)

Well, when it comes to Jesus, nothing seems impossible to Mary. “Just point the way. I will fetch him.”

Now let's notice the first words of our resurrected Lord Jesus. They concern tears:

Jesus saith unto her (Mary), Woman, why weepest thou?(John 20:15, KJV)

In my red letter Bible, there they are. The first words of our resurrected Lord concerned tears, “Why weepest thou?” They are not words about himself, not the suggestion that he be congratulated on conquering death, not words about himself at all, but simply words about Mary and about her the state of her heart.

With this question, we learn that the affairs of our human life matter to the One who is now in charge of everything. Your hopes, your dreams, your fears — these are the things that concern your Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

The old prophet Jeremiah once used a wonderful image to express his sorrow

over the suffering of his people:

Oh that my head were waters,
and mine eyes a fountain of
tears, that I might weep day
and night for the slain of the
daughter of my
people!(Jeremiah 9:1, KJV)

So, it is with Mary Magdalene. She stands at the empty tomb of Jesus weeping — her eyes a fountain of tears. But in the resurrection of Jesus, we have a joy that can dry up even a deluge of tears. Suddenly all things are changed, for Jesus stands before Mary again, and the days of weeping such bitter tears are over. Life has a whole new horizon now, because Jesus is risen. This old earth has a warm and steady ray of light shining on it now, for Jesus is risen and has great love for each of you.

And so, if this Easter morning should find in your soul some mixture of grief, maybe for a loved one long time gone, certainly you may weep, but do not weep as if you have no hope. Your loved one rests in the hands of Jesus, and we believe that that is gospel. That is good news.

And if this Easter morning should find you entirely happy, perhaps with love and romance, perhaps with some great undertaking awaiting you, then go for it! For this Jesus who meant so very much to Mary Magdalene of old loves you with the same kind of love with which he loved Mary, and the thief on the cross, and saints and sinners galore. Let Easter encourage you as you strive for the good lying before you.

Let me end this sermon by lifting up a verse that I think permits me to express something of the moral meaning of Easter. I refer to that word of restraint Jesus spoke to Mary:

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...(John 20:16-17, RSV)

Do not hold me, Jesus says. But the overflowing of Mary’s heart is such that her every instinct is to hold Jesus. And there is something good about this — something profoundly good. But *how to do it* is the good question.

Recently, my wife Carol sighed and told me recently that she just *cannot* help but touch the old folks at The Wartburg. The Wartburg is a Lutheran Retirement Village about fifteen miles from here, up in Mount Vernon, NY, and Carol is the Chaplain there. In our strange, litigious world, it would probably be prudent for Carol to not touch the folk there at the home, but, as for Carol, she cannot keep herself from reaching out and laying her hand on them or giving them a pat on the back or a kiss on the cheek. She can hardly help herself, and I bet you understand it. People seem beautiful to her — including elderly and frail people. As a mother joyfully reaches for her baby, so Carol joyfully reaches out and touches others.

And when she does that, she is stepping into the role of Mary Magdalene, who reaches out and touches Jesus! For Jesus is present in the life of those around us. Jesus is risen! Therefore he is there to be touched, and he wants to be touched in the form of our loved ones, our neighbors, the strangers in town, in the poor, even in our enemies.

Some of the people around us are delightful. It is easy to touch them. Over supper the other night, Carol told me about a birthday party for one of her ladies at the Wartburg. The lady was

celebrating her 103rd birthday! There was a small band for the party, with guitar, and the birthday lady danced to the music. She was full of life.

But some of us humans are not quite like that. There are some people on this earth needing to be touched, to be helped, to be comforted, but if this is to happen it is because of Mary Magdalene seeing Jesus whereas before she had seen simply the gardener. When we can

learn to see others as Jesus sees them, then we will be even better people on this earth. Indeed, when we learn to see Christ *in* others, then we can give full force to our affection for him, rush to him, and hold him all we want, for that is where Jesus wants to be found — there in the form of the poor, the needy, those dear to us, indeed each one the Lord sends our way.

To this Risen One, to this Jesus who waits to be found in others, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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