

April 1, 2018 Faith....It's Not Easy John 20:1-18

This is the most important moment in the Church year. On this day, on this morning, we celebrate the truth of what God has done...or we fail. But before we get into that, it is not lost on me that this is April the 1st. April fool's day, a day on which we may in good humour seek to trick friends and loved ones alike by telling them something we know is not true. So on this first of April I have brought you two statements from Scripture that bear remembering. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4:10, "We are fools for Christ." And that is the way much of the world will see us. Paul also wrote in 1 Cor. 1:25, "The foolishness of God, is wiser than man's wisdom." Words upon which it is worth our meditating.

This is the most important moment in the Church year! It is really unfair to say that one moment in a year of worshipping God is more important than another. But I believe it to be true. This is the moment in which the Church reveals who she really is. For we who preach the Gospel, this is the moment in which we reveal whether we believe as disciples of Jesus have believed for the balance of 20 centuries, or not. This is the moment in which the Christian cause shows its true colours....sold out to God who saves....or just like the rest of the world, placing our confidence in the wisdom of men, the wisdom of the world.

This morning is the anniversary of that 3rd day on which the resurrection of Jesus occurred. The Nicene Creed

says, “On the 3rd day HE rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.” The Apostle’s Creed says, “On the 3rd day HE rose again.” More important than any statement of what we call Christian doctrine, Christian theology, there has never been a moment of time in the history of the church that the standard of faith was other than, “HE is risen!” Jesus saves. We are part of a 20 century line of witnesses, to this fundamental statement, “HE arose. HE is not dead, HE lives.”

What I do want you to see and remember this morning, is an accompanying fact, that the followers of Jesus then as now, do not find that fact easy to grasp. They did not set out to convince the world of this truth until they were convinced. Then as now, faith was not, and is not easy. The testimony of the earliest believers, is not we found the tomb empty and we believed Jesus to be the Son of God and risen in the glory and grace of the Almighty. Rather they testify that they found it hard to believe, difficult to grasp, and they dismissed the witness brought to them by women whom they knew well, and in whom in most things they trusted as sisters in the cause of the Kingdom of God.

It was a deliberate decision on my part to make John’s Gospel the centerpiece of our Biblical journey through the season of Lent and Holy Week to our resurrection celebration this morning. We call the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke the synoptic Gospels. They have this in common, they attempt to present us with an account of Jesus

ministry that takes us from HIS miraculous birth, through the teaching and healing ministry to the cross and the open tomb. They attempt to lay things out in order. To our modern minds that is a very attractive approach. John's Gospel is different in this fact. He is continually telling us the meaning of the things that occurred, and the things that were said. And when we come to Passion of Christ, the story of the cross and the open tomb he is a singular witness. Because he knew Caiaphas the High Priest, he had a front row seat where others were observers if at all, from a distance. And when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, John was one of the two men, who went to actually see the open tomb, after the women, Mary Magdalene in particular had delivered to them the news, that the tomb was empty.

I do want you to notice how they struggled to understand and grasp and believe that which had occurred. Not because I want to introduce skepticism, but because their journey of faith mirrors that of many others. They saw the evidence of the empty tomb, but it took time for the fact of the resurrection to sink in. If we think faith is a challenge, or a struggle, John's testimony reminds us in the clearest of terms, that his word to us, with a smile on his face would be... "well welcome to the club!"

Peter and John, ran to the tomb. That is what John tells us. They did not go for a stroll, or a power walk, they ran all the way. John in humility does not refer to himself in the

account by name, but he is that “other disciple,” and the “one Jesus loved.” Clearly they were close, what we would call best friends, so close that in the moments close to death, Jesus would commit the care of his mother Mary into John’s keeping, so that she would have a home, and food, and continue to be part of a family, a household.

John and Peter run to the tomb. They go there literally to see what is to be seen. Mary Magdalene told them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we (the three Marys mentioned in the other accounts) we don’t know where they have laid HIM.” John gives us this detailed description. John was the fastest of the two runners. He “outran” Peter and arrived first at the tomb. He bends over and he sees the strips of cloth that the body was wrapped in, and the special cloth that had been around Jesus head. That one has been folded with care. But John did not enter the tomb. I am a bit like John. On our first trip to Israel, at the replica of the tomb in the historic village of Nazareth, I passed on the experienter of going into the tomb.

So Peter finally catches up to John, but he immediately passes John. He goes into the tomb and looks around up close. And yes, John does go into the tomb finally. And yes, he too inspects the details. But John gives us a very specific testimony. He saw the details of the shroud and so on, and he believed what Mary Magdalene had told them. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid

HIM.” And to make absolutely sure we get the point John further testifies concerning all of them, including Mary Magdalene, “they did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

I checked the ancient Greek text...which translates...”for not yet knew they the Scripture, that it behoves Him from among the dead to rise.” In other words, standing in that cold and empty space, what Peter and John believed was that the tomb which had held the dead body of Jesus on Friday, is empty on Sunday morning. I say again....faith is not easy. And it takes 2 things to actually get to where we believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Whether you have been aware of it or not it is true for all of us. It takes 2 things to arrive at believing “on the third HE rose from the dead.” First it takes a credible human witness, someone you trust, someone you know. The disciples went back to their homes scratching their heads. Mary Magdalene had also returned to the tomb. She wept over this catalogue of occurrences, Jesus death, the open and empty tomb. And then she meets the risen Lord in the Garden. She would be the one to tell the disciples including Peter and John, “I have seen the Lord.”

The thing is, according to John, credible witnesses can only take us so far. All of us need something...someone more. Credible witnesses can only tell us the facts. As believers we have had a moment, an experience when “the penny dropped.” When it ceased, this gospel stuff to be information, and

became a relationship. A meeting with the Lord, touched by HIS Holy Spirit, what my daughter calls “the God moment.” When it ceases to be about ideas, and becomes our faith relationship with Jesus. It takes God’s presence to transform the credible witness into faith. For some that happens in minutes. For some it takes a long time. For the disciples it took a week. For Thomas the disciple it took twice as long.

So I say again. “Faith....it’s not easy. Because it is not something we can create because we want to. Be encouraged by the journey of John and Peter, Mary Magdalene and these other Biblical figures. They stood at ground zero...and they tell us, they found it hard to believe. God bless you on this special day. HE is risen....just as HE said.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, we celebrate before YOU. Help us to live as people who have spent time in YOUR presence. Open our eyes to the Biblical truths that foretold YOUR resurrection, as well as those words which proclaim its occurrence. In YOU we find eternal life. In YOU we discover a well of love that empowers us to love as YOU have loved. Help us we pray to discern the windows and doors of opportunity that YOU give us to care and serve others, even as YOU have met the deepest needs of our hearts and lives. In Jesus name we pray.