



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Coming, Lingerin, Leaving

April 21, 2019

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Early 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. 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.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to 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.’” 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.

Sermon:

For 195 years, in this very room, in these very pews, people have sat to hear the story Cindy just read. As long as this building has been standing, since 1824, and even before for the 100 years before that, this congregation every Easter has told the Easter story. And each year the cast of characters to hear that story has been different. So I have to ask: Why are you here this morning? Of all the places you could be on this glorious day, why are you here? What brings you to this place? What are you looking for? Perhaps more importantly, what do you hope to leave here with?

The cast of characters on that first Easter was remarkably smaller. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene comes by herself. She comes accompanied only by her grief and her loss. It is clear that she is heartbroken over the loss of Jesus, the one who she came to love, the one who she cannot imagine a day without. The day before, I'm sure she set out all of her supplies to be prepared. And yet on that morning as the light came closer and closer to rising, I bet her feet dragged a little bit. Eager to honor him, hoping to care for him one last time. But the reality setting in that she would no longer be with him. She came alone and in grief.

The other two characters, they came running. They came running because she raised the alarm that Jesus is gone. Someone has taken him, and so they go running. Peter, the one on whom the whole church will be built, right? And John, the one who wrote this gospel, takes the claim of the disciple whom Jesus loved. Nice when you get to tell the story, right? And in contrast to Mary's almost resistant walking, it presents the two of them almost in a race, with the beloved one, the one who wrote the story, getting there first, of course. But Peter sticking his head in. And they see something that is thoroughly unexpected and unexplainable. They see the bandages of Jesus lying there in the tomb. They see them wrapped up and tidy and left there.

And yes, it says that John believed, and yet there is no clear indication that he believed anything other than what Mary had said was true, and that is that Jesus was gone. Because in the very next sentence, John says they had not yet heard about and understood what the resurrection meant. They came for different reasons, one barely making it there, the others running to get there. And yet, those two men, after they poked their heads into the tomb to see the amazing miracle, there is a profound disappointment, isn't there? Peter and the beloved disciple, what do they do? They go home. Having seen that, all they do is they pack up, and notice they didn't go to hang out and figure out what was going on, they didn't go to share the news with the disciples, they didn't go anywhere except back to their own homes. Back into isolation. Back to in their times, I'm sure, their version of youtube blasting all the scandals of the day, and all the worries of the world. The two men, the two disciples, they went home.

But what makes this story work is that one of them did not. Mary, she stayed. Now, we don't know if it was because she was so stricken with grief that she couldn't move, we don't know if it was because she was paralyzed by fear, but we do know that she stayed. She stayed in the garden. She stayed in that place, she poked her head into that tomb, and there were two angels sitting there. She was so grief-stricken, she doesn't even realize they're angels. She is so beside herself, she is carrying such a heavy weight, that even when they tell her the good news, it is as if she did not hear it at all.

And she turns to stumble away, she turns to go, and runs right into Jesus himself, the one that she was longing for, the one that she was missing, the one that she was mourning. And yet, there too, not a sliver of recognition. What was it, do you remember, in this story, what is it that causes Mary to recognize him? You can say it, it's ok. What is it? He calls her by her name. And suddenly the good shepherd, you know, the one who the sheep recognize by the good shepherd's voice, suddenly she knows exactly who he is. And they linger, and they stay, and she wants to keep him there, but he has work for her to do. You see, Jesus could have revealed himself to anyone. Jesus could have revealed himself first to Peter, the rock on whom the church would be built. He could have revealed himself to the beloved disciple. But they didn't stay. She did.

And so he chose to reveal himself first to her, and she became the very first apostle of the living God. She was the one to whom Jesus said, Go back, and you tell those disciples He is risen. It is in fact the shortest sermon ever delivered, and quite frankly, all of us have paled since then. She is entrusted with the news that He is risen.

I don't know why you came today. I don't know what you have to do after this, maybe reservations waiting for you at some restaurant, maybe a calendar this long, a schedule of events to do. But here is what I would say to you. I would say don't be Peter, don't be the beloved disciple, and simply go back to the world the way it is. But instead, linger here, linger in this garden, linger with one another, that you might even now meet the risen Christ, and that you might leave here with the conviction, not just to even admit you went to church on Easter Sunday, but to walk up to somebody on the street, hoping that they will respond just as I'm hoping you will now. But walk up to them and say Christ is risen! (Congregation: He is risen indeed.) And I hope they will be more enthusiastic than that... Christ is risen! (Congregation: He is risen indeed!)

You see, here is the thing. Resurrection is not just a one and done thing. It is not even just something that awaits us all at the end of our earthly lives. It is something that breaks into the expectations and the reality of the world in this very moment, offering the newness of creation. It is no accident that John puts this story in a garden. The Garden of Eden. The original beginning in which everything was good. And it is from this story and from, hopefully, this service, that you can leave here and participate in

that goodness. But you need to be more like Mary, and less like Peter. You need to stick around long enough to let this sink in, not just here, sink in here until we too, like Mary, weep not just with grief but weep with the joy of what God offers even today. And then when you leave here today, don't go home, don't go back to the regular world, for God's sake don't turn on youtube. Go out and instead dwell in places of life. Go to gardens, whether they look like this (flowers on chancel) or not. Go be part of partnering with God in the recreation, the renewing and even the resurrection of this world. The events of this week tell us that this world is in desperate need of it.

And if not us, who? And if not now, when?

I have no idea why you came to church this morning. But I hope you linger. I hope you come face to face with Christ, and then I hope you, like Mary Magdalene, leave this place and tell everybody and anybody about it. And that, that is how the resurrection of this world will start, one proclamation, one voice, one breath at a time.

Friends, Christ is risen. (Congregation: He is risen indeed!)



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor