

Feeling the Love
Easter - Year B - 04/04/2021
Psalm Reading: 118:1-2, 14-24
1st Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9, 2nd: John 20:1-18

“He is Risen!” “He is Risen indeed!” We say these words every Easter, and we pronounce them with joy and meaning as we come face to face with our fellow Christians in the Narthex or in the Sanctuary. At least that is how it would go on a normal year. This is the second Easter that we have not been able to be together. Yes, we feel joy because of what our Lord has done, but I think it is also the sight of our fellow congregants that puts that tone in our voices and the smiles on our faces.

Though it is hard for the average American male to say this, a big part of the reason for that uplifting tone and the smiles that we might recall from that Easter two years ago when we were all together, is the love that we feel for one another. Yes, I said the “L” word. Just admit it to yourself, you love coming to church, not just because you love God, but because you love the people you worship with, (well, sometimes you wonder if it really is everyone, and you probably do not love them as much as you should, but still you love them).

And so we celebrate this wonderful day on which we do everything in a traditional way, with Easter eggs, a savory meal (with some very sweet desserts), time spent with friends and family catching up on our lives since Christmas and quizzing the young on their hopes and dreams. We are surrounded by flowering bulbs and almost overwhelmed by the perfume of

the hyacinths. But you know, that first Easter Day was not much like what we think of as Easter. Rather, it was a hectic and perhaps frightening experience for some. In fact at the end of the Gospel of Mark when the women among the disciples find Jesus is not in the tomb, they were all “Trembling and bewildered...[and] they went out and fled from the tomb...because they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

But our reading from the Gospel of John, though not so scary as Mark, also gives us a version full of surprises and perhaps a bit of consternation, and it contains something else that is remarkable; it is, as William Barclay points out in his commentary, filled with love.¹

The story begins with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb where Jesus had been placed. John does not say why she was there, but the Gospel of Matthew (27:59-61) tells us that she goes to place spices on the body to prepare it for burial. She comes out of duty and love in order to do what must be done.

When she arrives, she finds that the stone has been removed. (This would have been a shock.) What could it possibly mean? She may have been afraid that grave robbers had entered the tomb, or worse, political foes, set on desecrating the body. So, before investigating herself, she runs immediately to Peter, and to someone else... Of course, she goes to the disciple that Jesus loved. His close friend, who, tradition has it, was the Apostle John, the one who would be instrumental in writing the Gospel from which this account is taken.

1 William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956) 311.

Mary, nor the disciples themselves, had a concept, at that moment, of what had really happened. They suspected the worst. You can imagine the faithful John running as fast as he can. He far outstrips Peter. We always think of Peter as being the impetuous one, but here is John, running headlong toward possible danger because of his love for Jesus, and running so fast that he arrives without any help he might have need of when he arrives to confront what could be robbers or even soldiers carrying swords.

When they both finally arrive at the tomb, Peter and John see the strips of linen that had been wrapped around the body of Jesus, neatly stacked, and they immediately come to the conclusion that this situation is not some hasty robbery or a desecration of the tomb. No, such neatness, such deliberate action is evidence of something amazing, something for which they had dared not hope, something which they could barely understand, that somehow, some way, there is a remote chance that Jesus is alive! They immediately go back to the place they were staying, no doubt to tell the other disciples of what they had seen.

But now, after Holmes and Watson, I mean Peter and John have made their deductions, now that they have already left, the real evidence comes in. The final proof and a great commission is given to another. For here is Mary, crying outside the tomb. (v.11) She has followed the two Apostles back to the burial place, but Peter and John by this time had already run off again.

Two strangers appear to Mary, in fact they are angels. And they take pity on Mary who is, no doubt, bewildered, no doubt

shaken, for she has a great love for Jesus who had cured her mental distress, and who she recognizes as her teacher and as the Son of God. The angels try to comfort her, but she is inconsolable, she cries, her eyes filled with tears. The angels depart the scene, and she sees another figure...one that she does not recognize through her tears, she thinks it is the groundskeeper. In her error she begs the supposed gardener to lead her to the body of Jesus, if he knows where it is.

In this dramatic moment, we know this man, but Mary cannot see him, she is literally blinded because of her love. It is none other than Jesus. And we can imagine Jesus, in his pity and love for this woman, say her name, “Mary”. (v.16)

The voice of Jesus is so familiar. She has heard the man preaching. She has heard him conversing with the Apostles. She has heard him addressing her in terms of comfort and hope. It is the voice that clues her in. She knows it is Jesus. (v.16) She turns to him with heart swelling and cries out “Rabboni,” “Teacher!”. He is the master, and she is the student, a disciple of Christ.

She is overcome to such a degree that she grabs onto him in her joy and love. Now, you see the intensity of devotion Mary has for Jesus! You see how she cannot restrain herself with bonds of decorum. You see how much she loves the Lord at this moment. And, as we stand or sit here, listening to this story, we try to put ourselves in the ecstatic state which Mary must have been experiencing at that moment. Yes, we love Jesus. Yes we love God, but to reach this degree of intensity ... we try and we fail! We want to love God with the emotion that Mary feels. We want the tears to flow and our hearts to pound.

We want to know the intense love of God, and we want to respond with our own intense love. But can we reach that ideal?

What is in us that makes it so hard? Is it that distance of time? Some two-thousand years. Is it the skepticism instilled in us by a society that puts a high value on factoids and denigrates faith? Are we like Thomas? Do we need to place our hands in the side of Jesus before we can believe and shout out exuberantly, “My Lord and My God!”? Would touching Christ’s wounds even be enough? Do we have to go to the extremes of glory or tragedy to be moved to such a degree?

My friends, it is a hard question. But one that I think needs answers. How do we truly feel the love? We have a direct line to the most powerful force in the universe, the love of God. Yet every day we squander our greatest opportunity. I have thought often on this question.

My short answer is that it is a project of breaking down the barriers in our minds, and the barriers that we are ever building up around our hearts. We have built up so many defenses that we cannot bear to let them down. We have so many fears that have been with us for so long that we end up cherishing them. We have to put them aside. We have to let ourselves be vulnerable, vulnerable for just a moment, and let in the love of God. Yet, I think this is not something we can do all at once.

We do this first by following Christ’s example, practicing Christ’s radical love on one another. It begins when we smile at one another on Easter morning and say, “He is risen!” But it we have to go even further, forgiving faults, disregarding slights, giving more than we receive. This is being like the master. And

we do this, not just with our fellow church members, but with everyone in our community. We must always remember that we are made in the image of God (and so is everyone else) and loving each other is part of what we do when we love God.

It sounds easy enough when you say it out loud. But my friends, it is one of the hardest things you will ever do. Love is all about giving up the self. How do we forget our own self interest? How do we stop thinking how everything we do can be turned to our own advantage? How do we find the energy to run to the tomb of Jesus? How do we cry at his death and become overjoyed at his rising?

Well, we all know who is the master of giving up the self. It is Jesus Christ. Mary and John were fortunate to have Jesus with them right there as an example. But we too have Jesus with us every minute of every hour of every day. Jesus gave fully of himself out of love for us. It is his sacrifice that saves us.

So to feel the love, the love of God and the love of each other, it follows that we become the disciples of the Master and give of ourselves in radical ways. I don't mean only giving money or things, but of our time and talents, and ultimately from our hearts and souls. But love is not just about giving, but being able to accept love as well. Jesus accepted the love of His followers. He accepts our love. So, do not close yourself off from friends and neighbors. For sometimes receiving what others have to give is also a gift to the giver.

In the end of our reading, Jesus sends Mary back to the disciples. It is Mary Magdalene, the one who feels so intensely, who is the first to truly announce the Good News to the disciples, and thus to the world. It is her great commission. She

tells them, “I have seen the Lord!” And then she tells the disciples the things that Jesus had said. (v.18) And this is another thing that a disciple does, through God’s love she conveys God’s Word. Perhaps, this is the greatest gift we can give to one another and to those who do not yet believe.

So, I am thinking in all of this, we may find that it is in our interaction with God and with each other as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ that we come, finally, to fully feel the love of God.

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