

April 1st, 2018 – Easter Sunday

“Following Jesus to Becoming Good News”

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Throughout Lent, the time of listening, reflecting, praying and seeking to deepen our relationship with God before Easter, we have been following Jesus. We learned that following Jesus is not a path lined with beautiful flowers and smooth bricks and tasty refreshments along the way. The way of faith is treacherous, filled with blind alleyways, failures, denials, betrayals, heartache and loss. The Jesus who awakens Lazarus and heals the blind and feeds the thousands and teaches and leads is also the Jesus who goes to the Cross. Between the Cross and the Resurrection, that initial awakening to the path of Christ changes and alters our understanding of our lives greatly. We are changed by that journey, by our following.

But why is the Resurrection Good News for us? What is the meaning of this strange story from 2018 years ago, which we still celebrate even now?

In the very early years following Jesus’ death, the Christian church agreed on one thing – that the Resurrection is God’s proof and seal for us that sin and evil and death have been lifted up by Jesus Christ on the Cross and defeated and conquered in the Resurrection. For the early church, the Resurrection and the salvation, or redemption (the other word we use for salvation), God offered through Jesus was a very real, very present experience. Through the Cross and the Resurrection, our relationship with God is restored, and we become Good News for neighbor and enemy alike. In the shadow of the Cross and in the light of the Resurrection, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the good works of God and share the love of Christ in the world without guilt, or shame, or judgment. Or, to say it differently, now our works reflect the redemption of Christ’s Resurrection. Even when death comes to us, we no longer need to fear death, because, as Paul says, in Christ,

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

⁵⁵ *‘Where, O death, is your victory?’*

Where, O death, is your sting?’

⁵⁶*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 15*

That is a whole lot of theology about what it means to become the Good News, but really, the simple way to say it is that **Jesus Christ is risen today** – and this is what Mary tells the disciples when she finds out Jesus has been resurrected. She runs to her village and tells, she proclaims, she shares with others the Good News, *“I have seen the Lord”*.

All we really know about Mary Magdalene is that she was a follower of Jesus, and she is from the town of Magdala. Her name simply means ‘Mary from Magdala’. The tradition says all kinds of things about who Mary was and I think we do that to her because we like to project change onto other people, so we don’t have to be changed ourselves. This lets us make faith all about rules, right and wrong, who we should be – a code of behavior. A code that mostly applies to other people, if we are honest about it.

Following Jesus absolutely changes us, though. We are altered from the inside out by the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in our lives. What is different, what has changed, is not

what we expect, though. The change that happens with Mary and the disciples and us, after the Resurrection, is a deep inward change, which may or may not look different on the outside. For example, I am pretty sure that Mary is still prone to assumptions and wrong conclusions, even after she meets the Risen Jesus in the garden. What makes Mary different, why she is changed, is that she is becoming the messenger of the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection. She knows the love of Christ for her.

Think about some of the other people who followed Jesus. Peter is no less impulsive after the Resurrection than he was before the Resurrection. He is perfectly happy to do stuff and then explain it later. We see this before the death of Jesus in the Gospels, and then after the Resurrection, throughout the Book of Acts. Peter is perfectly willing to throw down with Paul, just like he was willing to fight a centurion outside the Garden of Gethsemane. I imagine Peter would have done well in Brooklyn, before and after the Resurrection. What changes for Peter is the same thing that changes for Mary. He becomes a messenger of the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection and our salvation, an apostle to the Roman people. Peter knows the love of Christ.

Paul, who never met Jesus, is no less passionate, no less zealous, no less intellectually precise than he was before he had his experience with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Before that event, he was named Saul and was a kind of cattle rustler of heresy for the Jewish authorities of the day. What changes for Paul, who changed his name after he came to know Christ, was that he was now a messenger of that Good News. He knew without question that the foundation of the Good News was God's love for all people.

Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul, and the other disciples all became Good News for the world because of Jesus' Resurrection and its promise of a restored relationship with God, with Creation, and with others.

I ask you, then, what is keeping you from becoming Good News? Maybe you don't believe Jesus has conquered evil in his death and resurrection. Maybe you are like L.A., who used to be in a gang in Los Angeles. L.A. may be one of the smartest people I have ever met. He was a drive-by shooter for the gang. He got his nickname, L.A., not because he was from LA, but because he did most of his 15 years in prison in Louisiana. L.A. loved the Bible, even though he was illiterate. He loved talking about things of faith, but he wouldn't be baptized because he was never good enough. He believed he was evil and he had done too many evil things. No argument of mine could break his tight hold on this assumption about himself and that faith in Christ did not take those things into account and instead redeems them. He could not accept that Christ's defeat of evil by way of the Resurrection included him and that his past didn't really matter anymore. Of course, the Resurrection does include L.A., just as it does you.

Or maybe you are like me. Maybe you don't really believe that Jesus conquered and overcame death in his death and Resurrection. I was baptized on a hill in Wisconsin when I was 16 years old. I went to seminary after college and lost my faith. I was even an atheist for a while. And then my faith returned.

The thing is, though, whether I was in the faith or not, I feared death. I still do sometimes. Well...it is not necessarily death itself that I fear, but all the things that lead up to it. My dad was a doctor, and my mom taught pre-med students, so from a very early age I was looking through their medical books.

By the time I was a teenager, I had some of the worst illnesses the world has ever known. You, today, are looking at a man who has been miraculously healed from leprosy, scurvy, Rocky Mountain Spotted fever, various sleeping sicknesses, and numerous incurable disorders.

I am pretty sure there are worse hypochondriacs than I – you know who you are... I have had enough self-diagnosed illnesses, though – I think the word in the medical world is *co-morbidities* – that our daughter, Rhiannon, is planning on starting a podcast called “*What is my father dying from today?*”

It is hard for me to accept that Jesus Christ has conquered death upon the Cross and in the Resurrection. Maybe it is for you as well. And yet, I proclaim to you today, happily, that Jesus Christ is Risen, he is risen, indeed. God’s love overcomes, reaches beyond, my inability to accept that truth in some comforting way. Because that is what God and Christ do.

This is the Good News:

It didn’t matter to Jesus that Mary Magdalene was often at the mercy of her false assumptions, whether before or after the Resurrection.

It didn’t matter to Jesus that Peter was impulsive and prone to argument and conflict, before or after the Resurrection.

It didn’t matter to Jesus that Paul was a zealous, driven, passionate man, before or after the Resurrection.

It doesn’t matter to Jesus that L.A. had done horrible things.

And I wouldn’t be up here celebrating Jesus’ Resurrection with you today, if I thought it mattered to Jesus that my fear of dying has not yet left me.

It does not matter to Jesus Christ that you are struggling, that you are fearful, that you don’t always behave or follow the rules and the unspoken code. Because today is not about your behavior, the rules we have to follow, or some unspoken code others put upon you. God’s love for you reaches beyond and through all that because the Resurrection is for you, as you are, right now.

In the soft light of the Resurrection, in the flowing stream of God’s love for all of us, in the salvation and redemption offered in our relationship with God, we are, each of us, becoming the Good News – we are the people who show up and tell others that Jesus has conquered evil and death, and this is why we can be in relationship with God and with one another. So, on this Resurrection Sunday, don’t let your assumptions, your impulsiveness, your passion, your false thoughts about yourself, your fears stop you from following Jesus and becoming Good News. Maybe, just maybe, are just like Mary, Peter, Paul and all the disciples, and you are, just like them, becoming the Good News of the Risen Jesus Christ for the world, the love of God for all Creation, so that you and I, like Mary, can say, “*I have seen the Lord.*”

Amen.