

Seeking: Who Are You Looking For?

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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A few opening remarks (as is fitting for College Hill.) There is validity and merit in the theological debate over whether the story of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus should be taken literally or metaphorically. **There is no validity and merit, however, in the claim made by many that in order to be a Christian a person must believe that the empty tomb, as an actual historical event of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus, must be taken literally.**

But it is important to ask of yourself what it is you believe, and why. I usually spend a majority of my Easter sermons dwelling on this debate, or why each of the four gospels vary so dramatically in the actual details of their accounts of the empty tomb. Yet, perhaps in the end, all of that is an exercise of asking the wrong questions, or at least **not the most important questions.** For all do agree the followers of Jesus continued to experience him as a living reality, then and now. In fact, without the story of the empty tomb the faith tradition known as Christianity would have never developed. Nor would we have any knowledge of Jesus' teachings, his life and ministry.

What then, can we say about the meaning of Easter, the meaning of the Resurrection? On a grand scale, it promises that the ways of God will ultimately prevail over all the attitudes, behaviors, and systems opposed to God and the ways and teachings of Jesus, including the powers of tyranny, oppression, domination, and injustice. Yes, we continue to wait for that – the fullness of the kingdom of God. But ours is to active waiting, with participation and with hope, looking and working for signs of progress along the way – and there are signs.

Resurrection is about God transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life. The promise of Easter is a message of new beginnings, and the hope of transformation in the here and now, in our own personal lives, the life of this community of faith, and in the world.

With that said, perhaps one of the most relevant questions to ask in relation to the Easter story, as asked by Jesus in his encounter with Mary Magdalene in the version of the story found in the Gospel of John is, **"Who are you looking for?"** Throughout the season of Lent this year, we have been guided by a resource from A Sanctified Art, founded by an extremely talented group of Presbyterian women. The overall theme has been, **"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith."** This is how they connect that theme to the Easter narrative in John:

When Mary finds the tomb empty, she stands weeping at the vacant grave. Jesus, mysteriously appearing as the gardener, asks her: "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" In the haze of grief, Mary can only see what is right before her—or in this case, what is not before her. It is only when Jesus calls her

by name that the veil is lifted and she beholds the resurrected Christ. **On this Easter morning, who—or what—are you looking for?** Why have you come to the tomb? What kind of Jesus are you looking for? Who do we see in the living Christ? **What veils need to be lifted so we can recognize God's resurrection in all the places it occurs?"**

Resource biblical commentator the Rev. Danielle Shroyer adds:

All this time, we have been seeking: seeking answers, seeking guidance, seeking Jesus. But the responses we get depend very much on what—or who—we are looking for.

In every question [asked throughout Lent], a picture of Jesus has been forming in your mind. Who is he to you? What is he capable of? What does he want? The way you feel about that determines greatly how you hear his response.

As Mary weeps at the empty tomb, the picture she has formed in her mind is one of tragedy. Jesus has died, and now someone has gone so far as to steal his body. I imagine she thought enemies of Jesus did this, the same who wanted to squelch his voice and end his movement. This is her cry, even in the face of two mysterious figures robed in white.

And then she turns around. She sees a man standing there. She does not see that it is Jesus. She sees only in her grief, and only through the lens of tragedy. (What else could she do?!) **In the Aramaic translation**, [the language spoken by Jesus] **Jesus says to her, "Why do you weep? And who do you want?"**

"Who do you want?"

What an interesting question. **Of all the versions of Jesus out there, which one do you believe? For which Jesus are you crying? Who do you want?**

The question about the kind of Jesus you and I are looking for was explored by **Diana Butler Bass** in her recent 2022 book, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence*. That list comprises the title of the different chapters in her book, and the different ways she personally has experienced Jesus. It also reflects how her own understanding of Jesus has transformed from her childhood days to now. So on this Easter Day, let me ask you: **How has your image or understanding of Jesus shifted over time?** What version of Jesus are you looking for? What version do you want and what version do you need? As importantly, (and for some, most importantly) **are there versions of Jesus you need to let go of?**

I want to shift gears a bit now and draw your attention to a couple of particular details of the resurrection story also found only in the Gospel of John. During their conversation, **Jesus calls Mary by her name**, thus leading her out of her grief and misunderstanding, thus a movement from a sense of absence to one of presence. In Isaiah 43 we hear the prophet state, "But now thus says God...do not fear, for I have redeemed you; **I have called you by name, you are mine.**" **The same Sacred Presence calls you and I by name, as well. We are known by the Divine Creator which is beyond, among, and within each of us – moving us out of our grief and misunderstanding, and from a sense of absence to one of Presence.**

Jesus then says, "Do not hold on to me." What do you suppose the gospel writer had in mind theologically by including this statement? That phrase, in the Greek, uses the verb tense known as a present imperative, which literally means, **"do not keep holding on to me," which suggests that Mary has already embraced him. So, what might Jesus' response imply? There can be no clinging to what was. Everything is new.** We aren't called to hold onto Jesus, but to let go of what was and follow him, looking ahead to a new reality. Later in that same chapter in Isaiah are the words, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19) Yes, **God is always doing a new thing!**

That's what Easter, the Resurrection, can mean for you and me, and for us as a community of faith, and for the hope of the world. For example, have we not been experiencing a transformation and newness of life as we continue to move forward after the worst that was brought on by the pandemic? Are we not continuing to practice resurrection in our daily lives and in our communal life? **Practicing resurrection** means putting into action what it means to love God, love our neighbor, love ourselves, even love our enemies. **It means continuing the work of seeking justice, equality, and equity, as well as sharing compassion, forgiveness, hope, peace, joy, and love. It means being inwardly transformed so that we can help transform society.**

Now, in case you weren't counting, this Easter sermon contains 28 questions seeking your attention, admittedly some repeated more than once. Therefore, you have a lot of homework to do. And you just might be nearing some answers when I return to this pulpit in two months. In the meantime, I highly and truly encourage you to take advantage of the remarkable opportunity during my sabbatical, of which please know I am humbly and deeply grateful for this gift, to attend church school and worship (in-person or over zoom) as seven different professors from Phillips Theological Seminary each take a week of what I know will be very inspiring teaching and preaching. On the 8th week, Mike Gibson, our remarkable organist, will be leading a rousing Hymn Sing. I consider that kind of a palate cleanser between seminary professors and me coming back.

And by the way, while I take a break from daily church work and responsibilities to seek rest and renewal, I will also be pondering that question asked by Jesus, "Who are you looking for?" And I look forward to even more new beginnings and continued transformation here at College Hill upon my return.

Blessings and amen.

Resources:

"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith", A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.
Saving Jesus Redux - Lesson 11: Resurrection, Living the Questions DVD and print curriculum.