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“Jesus Is Not Where We Expect Him To Be

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 4, 2021

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 towards 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ 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.

Jesus has a hard time being where people expect or want him to be. In our gospel lesson, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to be close to Jesus or at least close to his body. She comes to be as close to him as she can get, hoping that proximity will help her deal with the pain and the grief and the rawness that has left her numb. She needs to be near him. And yet when she reaches the tomb early on that first Easter morning, Jesus is not where he is expected to be. Next, Peter and the mysterious disciple, whom Jesus loved, who was probably John--battle it out in a footrace to see whether Mary is right or if she is just crazed with grief. And again, when they get to the tomb, Jesus is not where he is supposed to be. And all that these two disciples get for their trouble and physical exertion is a pile of linen wrappings. These three disciples are not sure what to make of the empty tomb. They are confused and anxious and if it is possible, they are even more frightened than they have been for the past three days.

And Mary, poor Mary, she really needs that physical place where she can be close to Jesus' body. She is so completely lost and she needs that touchstone. She needs that foundational place of his presence. Even as we feel for their brokenness, our hearts go out to these disciples at this obvious tender time. Even as we feel for them, I think we have to ask them a rather difficult and even rude question. There is no way to put this question delicately. And so, I'm just going to throw it out there. Should these disciples or should any disciple of Jesus be surprised that he is not where we expect him to be, regardless of whether it is Easter morning or any other time? I mean, let's just think about Jesus' track record for the three years of his active public ministry. How often is Jesus out of place according to the expectations that others have for him? There are several gospel stories that come to my mind and I'm sure there are other stories that you can recall.

What about that time when Jesus comes walking across the water to his terrified disciples who are riding out a huge storm in a tiny boat? Who expects anyone to be walking on water, let alone in the middle of a storm? Jesus is not where he is expected to

be and his terrified disciples can only be grateful. And what about that time when Jesus is hanging around a village well in the middle of the day, talking to a woman with a bad reputation who is from the wrong country to boot. Rabbis like Jesus are expected to adhere to a strict code of behavior which forbids contact with unattended women and Samaritans. Again, he is not where he is expected to be. And at least for this woman, Jesus' unexpected presence makes a huge difference. Her encounter with Jesus may be the first time in her entire life that anyone has ever taken her seriously. And what about all those times when Jesus shares a meal with tax collectors and socializes with those who are considered sinners? And when he hangs around with the poor and the sick, offering them healing and hope? His religious peers, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and the scribes are particularly appalled by these actions of Jesus, for they expect him to only hang around with good, godly people like themselves.

Jesus is never where people want him to be, where people expect him to be. And some don't like him for what they consider to be his poor sense of direction and what they consider to be his poor sense of social norms and expectations. Now, though, it occurs long before his years of intentional ministry, I think my favorite story of Jesus not being where he is expected to be is that one little window that we have into Jesus' adolescence that the gospel writer Luke provides for us--the story of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus up to Jerusalem, to the temple for a Passover observance when he is 12 years old. Do you know this story?

It was customary that the whole village would go on this kind of pilgrimage, would go together as a group. And so, everybody making the journey to Jerusalem knows everyone else and all the adults keep an eye on all the children. It does indeed take a village to raise a child. And after the holy day is over and it is time to go home, well, then the whole village assembles again and sets out together. And though Mary and Joseph don't have eyes on Jesus and haven't had contact with him for a while, they trust that he is in the group somewhere and that another adult or 2 or 10 is keeping an eye on him. So, imagine their surprise and terror and ache when the village group stops a day's walk out of Jerusalem to camp for the night. Jesus has not come and found Mary and Joseph as he should. And when they began to look around and ask around and ask of him, no one remembers having seen him the entire day. I can only imagine their turmoil. I have felt such a time of parental panic for brief moments when our boys were younger, and I had lost track of them or they were not where I was expecting them to be. I imagine Mary and Joseph's panic to be something like that of present-day refugee parents who lose track of and get separated from their children when human traffickers pull them apart or when inhumane laws separate them at borders, or when the overcrowded boat in which they are traveling capsizes in the dark and nobody has a lifejacket, and nobody knows how to swim. Mary and Joseph can't have slept much that night, panic and fear and terror flooding their minds every time they try to close their eyes. And after an awful night, they rush back to Jerusalem, another day spent in travel, another day consumed by worry. It isn't until the third day, and we should note that the third day is significant--it isn't until the third day, when they are out of their minds with angst, that Mary and Joseph find Jesus. But they find him not in any place where they expect to find him. They find Jesus at the temple, sitting with the religious leaders and teachers, having a grand theological discussion about God. It is at this point where I believe Luke chooses not to relay the story accurately, for he has Mary, after three long days of horrible fear and uncertainty, he has Mary say to Jesus, in the most civilized way, "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

I'm not buying it, Luke. I'm not buying it! If my kid had been missing for three days, my first question to him probably would not have been spoken in polite Bible speak. In fact, I'm quite sure that the question I would have shouted at my child is not printable in the Bible or anywhere else for that matter. And then, to make matters even worse, Jesus answers Mary's question in that smarmy know it all tone as only an adolescent can. I'm sorry to any adolescents who are watching right now, but we've all been there. We've all been that adolescent answering a parental question that we thought to be quite dumb. We've all used that tone that Jesus does. Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house? I'm sure Mary and Joseph didn't like, didn't care, for that answer. And I'm guessing that Jesus lost a few privileges or maybe many privileges for a long time. But Jesus is never where people expect him to be, even at the age of 12. So where do we expect Jesus to be this morning?

I think one of the hard things about Easter for us, is that Jesus is no longer on the cross, no longer in the tomb. Instead, Jesus is on the loose. When he's on the cross or in the tomb, we know where He is, and we can keep an eye on Him. And we can be sure that He doesn't really know what we are doing, doesn't really know how we are truly behaving. Faithfulness is so much easier when we are in control. But when Jesus is not where we expect Him to be, when the tomb is empty and nobody's quite sure where He has gone, well, then we're no longer in control. And faith is trickier, for Jesus is now free to observe our darkest actions, to witness our less than faithful moments. And this lack of control over Jesus is a problem to our being, our normal selves, isn't it? Yet for all the trouble it causes us, our not knowing where Jesus is, I have to say that I believe Jesus being on the loose, Jesus not being where we expect him to be is, in a strange way, an even more hopeful reality for us. For when Jesus is not where we expect Him to be, when He is not safely sealed in the tomb, Jesus is free to walk alongside of us in our pain and our fear and our brokenness. And the comfort of His presence is real, and it makes a difference. It makes all the

difference. And when Jesus is not where we expect Him to be, He is free to lead us in helping God's kingdom, God's beloved community--to help it come by guiding us to care for the least and the last and the lost. For when we follow Jesus' example, we are pushed to ensure that everyone, without exception, has access to those things needed for the life that God intends for all of us: nourishing food, clean water, safe shelter, quality education, and health care. Equal access to justice, living without fear of being shot, sitting in a classroom or at the grocery store or at work or anywhere else. And these days, following Jesus means ensuring that everyone has access to a COVID vaccine. Jesus' presence with us and His presence in our actions makes all the difference. When Jesus is not where we expect Him to be, He is free to forgive us for all the ways we fall short of God's glory and all the ways we cover up the goodness of God which lies at the very core of our being. Forgiveness is huge. Jesus is our difference maker here, and we cannot take that for granted. When Jesus is not where we expect Him to be, He is free to gift us with life that is filled, overflowing with compassion and grace and the abundance of God. Where would any of us be without these gifts? Thank God Jesus is free to make this difference in our lives.

Why do we worship on this Easter morning? Why are we sitting in front of a TV or a computer or a smartphone? Is it tradition? Is it expectation? Is it the music? These are all good reasons, but I think that we have gathered to make sure that Jesus is not where we expect Him to be. We've gathered to make sure that He is free so that Jesus can call us to follow Him so that He can lead us to where people never expect us to be. For when we are in unexpected places in the name of Jesus and when we are doing unexpected things in the name of Jesus then the world is changed. The world is better, and God's kingdom, God's beloved community comes a bit closer. Jesus is risen. He has risen, indeed. No tomb, not even death can keep our Jesus from being where He needs to be. Look, did you see it? There He goes. There goes Jesus inviting us to follow after Him and after His example, surprising ourselves and surprising the world with God's love and grace. Amen.

And I invite us now to find our bulletins and together let us offer our Easter affirmation which is printed there.

We believe in Jesus, the one who walked our earth and whose God light illumines every darkness; the one whose life comes from the very life of God, our guide, our teacher, our friend; whose life is an intent of God's creative imagination; who sang love songs at His beginning and was blessed; who was rejected by the powers of the world and was executed by those same powers sharing the same death of us all. Love had been killed, and those who embrace this love thought it gone forever. But nothing can contain, bind, or stop the love of God, and therefore, nothing can contain, bind, or hold back the life Jesus began. And the story continues, and the gift is given to us and to all, of renewal, transformation, and life again and without end. We believe in the risen Jesus. Hallelujah. Amen.