



UNDERSTANDING RESURRECTION

April 1, 2018, Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

The themes of light and darkness weave their way through the Gospel of John from its first chapter to its last. So it is no accident that John begins the Easter story this way: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” Even Easter begins in darkness! For this Gospel, it is a signal that no one yet understands, believes, that Jesus has been raised from the dead. In fact, they are convinced that the opposite is true: Evil has won and death is final. Even as major clues are dropped, one by one, like the stone removed and the linen wrappings left behind, the appearance of two angels and finally even Jesus himself appearing, Mary Magdalene, Peter and that unnamed Disciple whom Jesus loved, don’t “get it” at first. This kind of “darkness” or lack of belief continues. Chapter 20 gives us three different resurrection encounter stories, with more to come in chapter 21, all of them offering a variety of faith reactions when disciples meet their Risen Lord.

The late Fred Craddock, teacher of preaching and a fine preacher himself, found this variety of faith responses instructive. It is, he said, a reminder that faith is not the same for all people.¹ Indeed in this sanctuary on this Easter morning are those who greet this day filled with joy and believing. Others are steeped in loss and grief and have come this morning in the company of Mary, weeping at the tomb. Some may be here filled with more doubt than faith, but have come nevertheless, if only to fulfill some ingrained obligation. Still others are here hanging on by their fingertips to a sliver of hope that it is all true, that the deepest question of heart and mind will finally find its answer in Word or song or in bread and cup.

If you think preachers are somehow different from the rest of the congregation, I’ll let you in on a professional secret: Easter is the most daunting Sunday of the year.

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



How can mere words ever match this mystery? How can one voice rise to the beauty of these flowers and the power of trumpets and organ and choir? What words can we muster to adequately explain, much less convince someone of the truth of the resurrection?

Tom Long, a friend of mine and of Doug, is another teacher of preaching and an excellent preacher himself. Tom told a story about Clint Tidwell—who was the pastor of a church in a small Southern town. One of Tidwell’s blessings—and curses—was that the local newspaper was owned and edited by one of his church members. The blessing part was that this elderly journalist thought Tidwell was one of the finest preachers around and he wanted the whole community to benefit from Tidwell’s homiletical wisdom. So every Monday morning, he would publish a summary of Tidwell’s Sunday sermon in the paper. The curse part was that though the newspaperman was well-meaning, he was also a bit eccentric, and Tidwell was often astonished to read the synopses of his sermons as interpreted by his member, the editor.

On the Monday after Easter, Tidwell made his usual walk down the driveway to pick up the paper. He could see from a distance that there was a large headline in bold print. Tidwell wondered what catastrophe had happened overnight—had war broken out? Had the local bank failed? He picked up the paper and was startled to read the words: **Tidwell Claims Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead**. Standing there in his driveway, a red flush crept up his neck. Yes, of course he had claimed in yesterday’s sermon that Christ rose from the dead, but gosh...was that headline news? I mean, you’re supposed to say that on Easter, aren’t you, that Christ rose from the dead, but that’s not like saying that some person who died last week had risen from the grave, is it? Tidwell looked at that screaming headline, and suddenly felt rather foolish.ⁱⁱ Tom pauses to remind us that it is indeed foolishness—the foolishness of the gospel that we are called to proclaim, to believe, on Easter Sunday. And every other day as well.

But we ourselves can feel a bit “in the dark” in understanding the foolishness of God that is wiser than our wisdom. Like the Reverend Tidwell, we can feel

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



somewhat uncomfortable perhaps even embarrassed when trying to understand and believe, much less proclaim or explain to others that Christ has been raised from the dead and in his resurrection is the promise of our own. That the Risen Christ is at work even now reconciling all things in heaven and on earth! In the Gospel of John the very first Easter begins in darkness, with Mary weeping, lost in grief. And Simon Peter and the other disciple still caught up in their silly rivalry trying to outrun each other to the tomb. All three of them convinced by the evidence at hand that evil has won and death got the last word and not only that, but now Jesus' body has been taken by some anonymous "they," adding insult to their grievous injury. But Easter dispels darkness, so John's Gospel also tells us in the opening verse today that it is morning. It is no longer night. And not only that, it is the first day of the week—now time itself is being measured in a whole new way because Christ has been raised from the dead.

Easter's light dawns gradually in chapters 20 and 21 of John's Gospel, being perceived and received in a variety of ways by Jesus' earliest disciples. Mary weeps, lost in her grief and loss. It is only by her stubborn insistence, her refusal to leave without finding Jesus' body that Easter finally dawns for Mary. A stone removed was not evidence enough to convince her. Two angels sitting inside a tomb raised no questions or even hopes for her. So convinced was she that Jesus was dead and that was the end of it all, that she did not recognize him when he stood right in front of her.

Simon Peter and the other disciple saw the linen burial wrappings inside the tomb, but not Jesus' body. Not long ago they had been there when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. They had seen Lazarus come out of his tomb and how others had to help unbind Lazarus' hands and feet from the burial cloths, and remove the cloth that in death had covered Lazarus' face. But Easter morning, they saw Jesus' burial wrappings cast aside...and the cloth that had covered his face rolled up by itself in another part of the tomb...and the text says simply, they went back home. One of them "believing," but believing what? They seemed to miss the evidence that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but not like Lazarus, not back to this life only to die



again. Instead this resurrection was different—no human assistance required or even needed—this resurrection was wholly the miraculous, powerful work of God.

When I came to the church yesterday morning, I went into the sanctuary and it was quite a developing scene. Women were here, had been here for a while, preparing to share with us the beauty of Easter. I tell you, it was a scene out of all four of the Gospels. It is the women who are there. And Mary Magdalene is the only woman who found at the tomb every time. In John, she alone is the one who comes, who stays by Jesus' tomb, just as she stayed by the cross. Her stubborn persistence keeps her there until the light breaks through. Until he speaks her name and she cries out in astonishment, and joy, and love, "My teacher!" And holds onto him for dear life.

Except her teacher has one more lesson for her and for all of us, too. It is Easter's first lesson. Jesus tells Mary she must not hold onto him...that she cannot cling to him. New Testament Professor Frances Taylor Gench writes that to hold someone or something is physical, certainly, but it can also be more than that. "To hold onto something," she says, "means also to control, to own, to define, to manipulate, to manage, even co-opt for one's own ends." Mary is the first person to learn that Jesus cannot and will not be held or controlled now that he is raised from the dead. And in fact, we will come to know Jesus only when we stop holding him to be who we want him to be...contained by our labels and categories.

Rowan Williams, the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, goes further when he says, "There is a clinging to Jesus that shows itself in the longing to be utterly sure of our rightness. We want him where we can see him and manage him, so that we know exactly where to turn to be told that everything is all right and that he is on our side. We do it in religious conflicts, we do it in moral debates, and in politics," the archbishop says. "We want to stand still and be reassured, rather than moving faithfully with Jesus along a path into new life whose turnings we don't know in advance."ⁱⁱⁱ



The title of this sermon is “Understanding Resurrection.” Like Reverend Tidwell, I proclaim that Christ has been raised from the dead, but I’m afraid I cannot explain the mystery of this greatest mystery. I cannot adequately prove the truth of this greatest truth of the Christian faith. What the Gospel of John affirms is that ‘Understanding Resurrection’ may take a lifetime. ‘Understanding Resurrection’ may require our stubborn persistence in the face of grief and tears; or understanding may come as sudden gift, dispelling doubt and fear. Understanding Resurrection may dawn on us slowly through an experience of Christ’s presence in our life or in our life together that is as tangible as it is mystical.

Whatever understandings we gain of the Risen Christ, and what his resurrection means for us and how he is at work in the church and in the world, we will have to keep in mind that we cannot hold onto him in ways that contain or limit or manipulate him to suit our purposes and preferences. By the power of God, he has cast aside every wrapping by which we would bind him. And it not enough to stand weeping forever or to go back home, as though evil has won and death gets the last word and the way things are is good enough.

With Mary Magdalene, the first Apostle to the Apostles, we are told to move out faithfully, even foolishly, with the Risen Lord along a path into new life whose turnings we don’t know in advance. Proclaiming the foolish and good news of this glad day: Christ is risen! And to join with the community of his followers who have heard indeed that Christ is risen! And in the morning, on this first day of the week, we proclaim in response: **He is risen indeed!**

Amen.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *John Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 142.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 86-87.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 132.