

Post-Easter Plans

Easter Weekend – April 7/8, 2007

Sermon Background Study

John 20:11-18, 26-31 (NRSV)

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

What are your Post-Easter plans in this Post-Easter world? Will you be bold and embrace God with your time, talents, gifts, and service? Will you simply be here next week?

Mary Magdalene has made her way to Jesus’ tomb early on Sunday morning. Very early. It is still dark. She is going to help finish preparing Jesus’ body for the year or so it will lie in the tomb,¹ as there hadn’t been time to finish the burial preparations before sundown on Friday.²

But when Mary arrives, she finds that the large, heavy, round stone blocking the doorway into the tomb has been rolled away.³ Something is terribly wrong and, without even looking in the tomb, she races to find Peter and another disciple. After running back to the tomb, the disciples discover that the tomb is empty. And empty in a weird way. The burial cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus’ body are still lying on the stone slab. But they aren’t piled haphazardly, as if tossed aside when the body was removed. Instead, they look like they had been wrapped around a balloon that had been deflated.

Reading With Heart & Mind

In 2007, we are reading through selected books of the Bible, one story or key passage each day. The daily passages are incorporated into the page three Bible readings that have always been part of these Sermon Background Studies. More info is available at www.standrewacademy.org

Here’s a few tips that can make this more meaningful for you:

- Read the story or passage twice during the day, once in the morning and once in the evening. This will help you to keep the story in your heart and mind throughout the day, living with it and letting it work within you.
- Keep some index cards with your Bible. Write down each day a phrase or a few words that catch your eye in the passage. Keep this card with you and glance at it once in awhile during the day. For example, you could set it on your desktop so it catches your eye from time to time.
- Find a discussion partner, someone with whom you can talk over the stories several times during the week. This might be your spouse or a friend. Sharing your thoughts and hearing those of someone else is a key way of getting into the story or passage.

¹The Jews of Jesus’ day practiced a two-stage burial. Jesus’ body was to lie in the tomb for a year or so, until only the bones were left. Then, his bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary, a bone box, and placed in a tomb alongside other bone boxes.

²Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon. When Jesus’ body is taken down from the cross, there isn’t much time left, for no Jew would touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday.

³Because families needed regular access to first-century tombs, the doors were often blocked with a round stone that could be rolled away if needed but would otherwise keep animals out of the tomb.

After the other disciples head home, surely perplexed and fearful, Mary stays behind and sits in the garden. She weeps, knowing only that Jesus' body is missing. Yet, she is soon thrust into her own post-Easter world. Jesus is no longer dead, he is standing right in front of her in the garden. Mary had even mistaken him for the gardener. She embraces Jesus, but things are not as they had been before. Jesus will not stay with her and the other disciples, he must yet return to the Father. So Mary rushes to tell the other disciples that Jesus' body was not stolen. God had resurrected Jesus. He lives!

That same night, the disciples gather in a locked room, fearful of being arrested or worse, for they know full well what happened to the followers of failed would-be messiahs. But then, Jesus comes to them as he came to Mary. And he is there with a purpose. Jesus commissions the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I send you" (John 20:21), and bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has post-Easter plans for them all.

"So that you may believe . . ."

John's gospel is the only one that tells us its explicit purpose – that the reader may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, therefore, may have life in Jesus' name (20:30-31).

From end to end, this gospel is about believing, placing one's faith in Jesus as Lord and God. Then, and now, each person, man and woman, is asked, "Will you believe?"

In the gospel, one comes to believe in two seemingly contradictory ways. First, when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the night, Jesus uses the "language of faith, which implies a meaningful human decision to believe in Jesus, a decision that expresses one's conviction and moral intent . . . [there is] no fence straddling, one is in or out."¹ (see 3:16-21).

Yet, on the other hand, Jesus also uses the language of being born a second time, or better, born from above (3:1-10). A baby does not participate in its birth. Life is God's gift to the baby. In the same way, faith is a gift.

We often struggle with these seeming contradictions. We tend to insist that it must be an "either/or," in which faith results from either our free choice or God's gift. Yet, the Christian proclamation is grounded in true, but admittedly, challenging "ands." Our decision to believe is genuine and freely made, *and* it is a gift from God. Here's a couple more of the foundational "ands." Jesus is fully God *and* fully human. Not sometimes one and sometimes the other. Not half-and-half. Fully God *and* fully human. God is one, yet three. A unity of one *and* a community of three. One inherently relational God.

How such things can be are beyond our reckoning. But our ability to understand something is not the measure of its truth, which I'm reminded of every time I read a lay treatment of quantum physics. Reality does not necessarily conform to what our minds can understand.

1. D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Yet, one disciple is not present, Thomas. Though the disciples tell him what happened, he doesn't believe. Thomas has been passionately loyal to Jesus (John 11:16), but after all, doesn't everyone know that the dead stay dead. And if the great resurrection has begun, why has only Jesus been raised? Where is everyone else? Thomas is going to have to touch Jesus' wounds for himself. Thomas has his own post-Easter plans.

A week later, Jesus returns to the disciples. This time, Thomas is present. He can touch the wounds. He can see with his own eyes. That is a good thing, but Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

It is easy to be hard on "doubting Thomas." But we forget that the first readers of John's gospel could not see and touch and be with Jesus as the first disciples had been. Jesus speaks for all those who came after that first generation of believers. Sadly, many people still need signs and wonders that they can touch and experience in order to believe. If we insist that our faith be grounded upon a startling personal experience, we are likely to remain faithless ourselves, for we can never touch Jesus' wounds as Thomas did.

Planning for faith

We live in a post-Easter world, a world that has been and is being remade by God. We are called to faith, to place our trust in God as revealed fully in Jesus Christ – and nowhere else. Such faith is nurtured by the church, the community of faith. It is here, among diverse people who are all on their own journey that we learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

But we can't expect to discover God's gifts if our post-Easter plans include only an occasional encounter with the people of God. It is like imagining we can learn to play the piano with a couple of lessons each year. The world clamors for our attention. It demands our priorities. Thus, we must make a conscious and deliberate decision to ground our life in God and live it among disciples of Jesus Christ. Each week offers us a new Easter, a new opportunity to embrace life with a passion that can only be found in the truth and love of our living Lord.

Reading With Heart & Mind

April 8 ~ 14

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Sunday 1 John 1 This beginning is similar to John's gospel. What about the claim by some that there is no such thing as sin?</p> | <p>Monday 1 John 2:1-17 Who is our advocate before God? What is the new commandment? Is it really new? How should we behave toward our fellow believers?</p> |
| <p>Tuesday 1 John 2:18-3:10 What is an antichrist? What do they teach and proclaim? How do we guard against being deceived? Why do you think John has such strong words against sin and those who sin? What could he mean when he says that all who abide in God don't sin? Don't we all sin?</p> | <p>Wednesday 1 John 3:11-4:6 Why does the world hate believers? What is love? How would you contrast "truth and action" with "word and speech" (3:18). What does it mean to "test the spirits?"</p> |
| <p>Thursday 1 John 4:7 - 5:5 Why is the statement "God is love," not merely sentiment? What makes it concrete? What might it have to do with our proclamation of the Trinity?</p> | <p>Friday 1 John 5:6-21 What is eternal life? How might it differ from everlasting life? How can we know that we are God's children?</p> |
| <p>Saturday 2 John This is a cover letter accompanying 1 John. The issue addressed in the letter is Jesus' true nature. There are some who deny that the human Jesus was identical with the divine Jesus. The Christians claimed that Jesus was fully God and fully human – one person, two natures.</p> | |

