

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Easter, April 7, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 203, 189, 188, 201, 457
Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9, James 5:13-20, Mark 16:1-11.
Sermon Text: John 20:1-18.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last Sunday we left the empty tomb with Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene wondering what had really happened. Today we continue with that history.

Today we find Mary crying at the empty tomb. She was still convinced that the removal of her Lord's body was due to grave robbery. Today we learn

LESSONS FROM MARY AT JESUS' EMPTY TOMB

- 1. Do not let any grief take Jesus' glorious resurrection away from you.**
- 2. As Jesus' believing sheep, listen to his voice.**
- 3. Do not hang on to the Jesus you think you know, but search the scriptures so that you may know who he truly is and what he did for you.**

After Peter and John looked into the empty tomb and saw that Jesus was not there, with the grave clothes neatly folded we read "*Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying.*" Mary stayed at the tomb.

Luther wrote that "Mary is ... an excellent example of all those [who] cling to Christ, that their hearts should burn in pure and true love toward Christ. In brief, she sees nothing; she hears nothing but Christ only. If she could only find the dead Christ; then she would be perfectly satisfied. And the evangelist for that reason has described it so diligently in order that we, who preach and hear it, may also, according to this example, gain desire, love, and eagerness toward Christ the Lord." (Quoted in P. E. Kretzmann)

She didn't think that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that is obvious from her next comment. "*As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?' 'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him.'*"

Angels greet her! When Mary stooped forward to look into the grave, she saw two angels in white garments sitting there, the one at the head, the other at the foot, where the body of the Lord had been lying. But she didn't realize these were angels, God's messengers. She didn't catch on to the significance of this. Her sadness and grief had overtaken her. They were sitting there with a purpose. They were ready to give information concerning the truth of the resurrection to anyone who was looking for it. They may have been the same angels that had been present at the earlier hour, or they may have been new messengers of the Lord, become visible for the occasion. Remember how just as at the birth of Christ the multitude of the heavenly host came down to the fields of Bethlehem to sing their song of praise? These angels, too, have a joyful message.

Sympathetically, the angels asked Mary "*Woman, why are you crying?*"

Their purpose was to open her eyes that she might see and hear the truth. But Mary's grief is too deep to notice the presence of glorious comfort. She was surrounded with evidences of her Lord's resurrection which should have caused her to leap and shout with joy, but she gives the angels the hopeless answer: "*They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him.'*"

Mary's situation is repeated in the experience of Christians the world over. If they are visited with any real or supposed trouble, they are immediately so engrossed with their grief that they fail to see the multitude of evidences all about them that Jesus lives, that really nothing can really matter. To trust unfailingly in the resurrected Savior must be the goal of all believers in the Lord.

Then we read that ***“she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.”*** Jesus himself greets her!

Look at her physical situation. She saw something that was factual. But she didn't realize Jesus was talking to her. In unbelief, many do not realize that Jesus is talking to them through the Holy Scriptures. Doesn't that even happen to us at times? Yes, we know that the Bible is the Word of God. But how easy don't we find it to not listen to it, to not read it, even to not hear it? We find it important to know all sorts of things that in the eternal scheme of things don't matter at all, things like the temperature outside, the weather forecast, the latest headlines and, perhaps worst of all, trivia like the latest celebrity gossip. But do we concentrate on hearing and learning the Word of God? In our self-occupation, in our preoccupation, it is so easy to set aside God's Word, like we do some of the junk mail that arrives in our mailboxes. It is so easy to think 'Oh, I'll look at that later' – both the junk mail and God's messages for us.

Jesus asks her ***“‘Woman,’ he said, ‘why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’”***

Let's look at her state of mind: in her grief and crying and personal problems she isn't even aware of what's happening to her. For example, when we come into church, don't we bring all our problems and frustrations with us so we can stew over them for another hour? Or do we bring our problems, needs, and worries into church so we can lay them at the foot of Jesus' Cross? Or, aren't we sometimes so taken up in our crying, our own griefs that we don't even look in the right places for answers and help? How easy isn't it to take our problems first to friends, neighbors, acquaintances, coworkers, newspapers, magazines for advice?

God gives us this invitation in Psalm 50:15: ***“call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”*** The hymn writer echoes that invitation: “Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer.” (The Lutheran Hymnal 457:2)

“Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’” She's still not thinking clearly. She jumps to the conclusion that Jesus is someone else and speaks as if she is planning to do something which is way too heavy for her. How could she handle the body of Jesus? Isn't that the case with us, sometimes? We plan to do things without even thinking about God's help, or even whether or not it would be edifying and good for our spiritual lives.

She thought Jesus was the gardener, the man who certainly should know something about the disappearance of her Lord. If he was responsible for the removal of the body, she wanted to know right away so that she might go and carry him away. The idea may have struck Mary that the gardener had seen fit to take the body to some other grave near by, because this tomb was to be used for another body.

She really couldn't have carried Jesus' body alone. In the same way, it is difficult to bear burdens alone, but with the help of others – especially with the help of God and fellow believers, it can be so much easier. For example, I know that many of our members are praying for one another, even if they don't know precisely what to pray for. We are pretty private people, but sometimes we forget that our fellow believers want to pray for us, if only they know what to pray for. You heard in our epistle lesson that ***“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*** (James 5:16)

Did you notice Mary's love? Though she is but one woman, she intends to single-handedly carry the body of her beloved Lord away. But Jesus felt that the time had now come for Him to reveal Himself. ***“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’”*** In the old familiar voice which all the disciples knew and loved, He spoke only that one word: Mary! The form of the speaker might have been unfamiliar, his body might have been glorified, but by that voice Mary would have known him anywhere. Thus the sheep know the voice of the Good Shepherd.

“She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher)”. This was a term of deep respect. John records her word in her native tongue. Rabbi is the more familiar word for 'teacher'. Rabboni is a word which shows a great and personal respect, and could also be translated ***“my master”***, or ***“my Lord”***, or ***“my teacher”***. He had become a very dear teacher for all his true disciples during his life on earth. He touched each of them personally.

So Jesus reaches each of us today. His gospel invitation is personal. When we recognize what it means for us, it's as if he has spoken our name, and we look into the face of our risen Savior.

Her emotions bounced in a moment from rock bottom to heavenly heights. She not only found Jesus' body as she wished, but she also had Jesus alive with her. We can imagine her wanting to take hold of Jesus and embrace him in welcome, wanting a return to the way things were. She would scarcely want to let him go. She may have thought that the old, familiar ways would again be resumed, that she could touch him, and assure herself definitely as to his identity. But his death and resurrection had changed things.

“Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” The familiar King James Version simply says ***“do not touch me”***.

She wanted to hold on to him as he had been previously, before he suffered, died, and rose again from the dead. Like her, we must always remember these facts of his life and death and life again, as we do in the creeds. But she – and all men – must recognize that Jesus is more for us, more than just the good man who walked the earth talking to people and doing good things. He is our Savior, our Redeemer, our King.

She wanted to hang on to him, to hold on to him. But she had to let him go. His death and resurrection had changed their relationship. He would not walk and talk with humans in the same way he had been doing. Jesus told her not to keep on clinging to him physically because in the new relationship he would be her ascended Lord, sitting at the right hand of the Father until he would come to judge the living and the dead. She wasn't going to lose Jesus, but he was going to belong to her in a new way.

He explains why: ***“for I have not yet returned to the Father.*** After his glorification had been fully accomplished, his disciples could become closer to him than ever before. By his ascension, Jesus entered into the full and unlimited use of his divine majesty, and thus also of his omnipresence. And therefore he is now closer to his disciples than ever before.

Meanwhile, Mary should run and tell the brothers the wonderful truth. Jesus had called the disciples his friends as he prepared them for his crucifixion. ***“You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”*** (John 15:14-15)

And now he called them his brothers. As he was now preparing them for his ascension, he drew them closer. As brothers, they had the same Father. He was God's only-begotten Son; they were adopted sons through faith in him. And they shared the same inheritance of everlasting life in the presence of the Father. Jesus would return to be with God just as he had been with God in the beginning. Yet Jesus, in his human nature, called the Father his God. God had kept his promises for the disciples.

By faith all believers have Jesus in their own hearts, a much more intimate, a much closer communion than the physical contact which existed between Christ and his disciples in the state of his humiliation.

Mary doesn't waste any time. ***“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.”*** She shared what she had learned from the Lord. This is part of her mission, as Paul reminds all of us: ***“Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Mary went to the disciples and told them she had seen the Lord! By faith, we, too, have seen the Lord. We can copy her eagerness to tell others about the risen Savior. We, too, are saved because Jesus rose from the dead, and are to share this good news with anyone who will listen. God grant this. Amen.