

Written Copy: John 20:3-9 “He Is Not Here! What Does This Mean?”

7th Sunday @ Pentecost: Easter in July

Sunday, July 11th, 2021

Text: John 20:3-9

³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Exegetical Statement

After Jesus had fulfilled the will of the Father that He had declared to His Disciples by rising from the dead, He arranges for a slow and methodical revelation of this supernatural event to them. At first Mary just sees evidence of a grave robbery. Then the other two women with her encounter first and angel that tells them what has occurred, followed by an appearance of Jesus Himself, encouraging to go and tell the Disciples. Meanwhile Peter and John come and see more of the evidence, the cloth wrappings lying undisturbed without a body in them, and the face cloth folded up neatly, all pointing not to grave robbery but to the resurrection. They both see, but only John believes according to what Jesus had told them before His death. They head back to town, neither one understanding that what they have witnessed is God's fulfillment of Scripture. Mary remains peering into the tomb and sees two angels, positioned to outline where Jesus body had been. They ask why she is weeping (since this is a time for rejoicing), and then a man who Mary believes is the gardener asks her the same question, and then one further question, “Whom are you seeking”. As she did with the angels Mary recounts her belief that someone has taken Jesus' body, and further that perhaps it was this gardener. If she would but tell her where the body is she will take it off his hands. At this point comes the time for Jesus to reveal Himself to her and does so with one word, calling her name. She responds with joyful recognition, addressing Him by the title she knew Him by before: “Teacher”. But things will not return the way they once were. Jesus has not resurrected in order to walk the roads of Palestine with them again, but to ascend to the Father and rule over all things on behalf of the Church. There is no need for Mary to cling to Him as she is, He will be with her and them in a whole new and better way, truly present always in His Word and Sacrament. And now is the time to begin to go and tell this glorious news.

Focus Statement:

Just as with the Creation of the world, the Lord reveals the recreation of sinful humanity through the Resurrection in a methodical way. He allows for the physical evidence to sink in. But it is only through His coming to His Disciples and His Words that they can see and believe in what Scripture, and He had told them must happen. He reveals to them why His death on the cross is “Good News”, and that He has risen to ascend to the Father to rule over all things on behalf of His people, the Church, for their temporal and eternal benefit.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We hear the Resurrection story every year at Easter and know many of the details well. We lose sight of the intentionality of the structured revelation of this supernatural event, and therefore miss the glory and the grandeur of what this means for us, and how the Resurrection changes everything.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Consider and meditate on what the Resurrection means to me, and how it changes everything in my life. How it affirms what Christ accomplished for me on the cross, and that He rose again not to leave us to fend for ourselves, but to ascend and rule all things on behalf of the Church and the ministry He has given it.

Subject Sentence: The Resurrection changed life now into eternity.

Introduction

There is nothing like seeing something familiar with new eyes. I like to re-watch movies that I have seen before but haven't seen for a while. I know the ending, so there's no surprise. But the very fact that I know the ending means I can see the plot build up in a different way, with new eyes. I can look for how the storyteller moved things along to reach the conclusion at the end, and can see with new eyes why things happened along the way as they did.

There are quite a few movies I could use as illustrations, but the one I chose is one I'm hoping most all of you are familiar with, as it is a classic that I think stands the test of time: "Casablanca" starring Humphry Bogart. My first exposure to anything about the movie would've been the song "As Time Goes By". My mom and dad loved that song, so I heard it long before I ever saw the movie. It took me a while to actually see it, because it was a black and white film. When I got old enough to be able to rent movies on VHS, I didn't consider anything that wasn't in color worth my time. And besides that, it was old, from yesteryear. But I was forced to watch it as part of an elective Film Appreciation Class in college. I walked out of that class sincerely impressed. I remember being surprised that it ended with Rick and Captain Renault walking away together as friends going on to new adventures, and Rick doing so without the girl, the love of his life. Watching it again numerous times since I picked up on why Rick was such a pessimist, having been stood up and dumped by her, and the bittersweet truth of why she had to do that. I saw that despite his gruff exterior he had a caring and loving heart. I picked up on how Captain Renault really appreciated Rick's friendship and saw in him a kindred spirit. I picked up on how both Rick and the love of his life Ilsa were drawn into their relationship innocently, and yet had to pay the price for things beyond their control. As Rick comments "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." And speaking of quotes there are some other famous lines from this movie, two of which are: "Here's looking at you kid", and the one at the very end of the movie: "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." The more you reflect on the movie, the easier it is to see why it's considered a classic.

When we think back and reflect on familiar things that we haven't seen in a while, we can view them again with new eyes. That's why I think it's a very useful exercise for us today to take a look once again at the Resurrection account, but to do so from a distance, outside of the normal liturgical setting that we encounter them in year after year. It is a good thing to celebrate the LORD delivering us from COVID-19 and to thank and praise Him, which is one of the purposes of Easter in July. But every Sunday is a Resurrection celebration no matter which readings we use. And today, by focusing again of the Biblical accounts of the Resurrection, we can, with new eyes, ponder the good Lutheran question, "What Does this mean...for me?"

An Overview of the Resurrection Accounts

To engage in this look at the Resurrection with new eyes we will use a combination of the four accounts presented in the Gospels. It begins early Sunday morning, before first light. Three women head out to the tomb before sunup with their spices in tow, intending to properly prepare their Teacher's body, something they didn't have time to accomplish before the Sabbath began on sundown Friday, when He was taken down from the cross and put into the tomb. They arrive before first light only to find the stone not only removed from the entrance to the tomb but blown outside of its track and lying on the ground. The picture here is not someone rolling it away, but a force blowing it away from the tomb entrance. Mary Magdalene sees this, sees that there is no body in the tomb, but doesn't register anything else. She is off on a run to tell Peter and John the horrible news according to her understanding: graverobbers have broken in and taken Jesus body.

Meanwhile after she leaves, the other two women: Mary the mother of James, and Salome enter into the tomb, and they see something Mary Magdalene did not: an angel sitting on the right side. **Mark 16:6-7** ⁶ **And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."** And they do what the angel says, they take off and head back toward Jerusalem.

On the way they have a surprising encounter. **Matthew 28:8-10** ⁸ **So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."** Jesus chooses to show Himself in His resurrected body to these two ladies as the first of many who will see Him.

Meanwhile, after Mary Magdalene reports what she suspects to Peter and John, they leave where they have been staying and head for the tomb. **John 20:3-4** ³ **So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.** Now it would be nice if we had a few more details. It would be nice if we had one account which would officially piece together all the different details detained in the four Gospels. But we don't. However, one Lutheran theologian has noticed how Peter and John in verse three set out for the tomb, but then in verse four they are now running. What if they didn't start out running, but something caused them to pick up the pace? What if that something was those two women who had a face-to-face encounter with Jesus. What if they ran into them and told Peter and John their story? That would certainly cause these two Disciples to pick up the pace.

John arrives at the tomb first, being the younger of the two men. He sees no angel, but does see an empty tomb, with the linen cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus' body lying there untouched and undisturbed. Lying there not as if someone unwrapped them from around His body, but it is as if His body had just disappeared from inside them. Peter then comes huffing along, and in fine Peter fashion goes right into the tomb. He sees the linen cloths and more. He sees the face cloth rolled up neatly and placed apart from the linen cloths. None of this looks like grave robbery. What grave robbers would or could unwrap the linen cloths in such a manner? Who would take the time to roll back up the face cloth? Why blow the stone off its track? Where are the guards that were supposed to be watching the tomb to prevent anyone from stealing the body? This all points not to grave robbery but to the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic words to them. Just as he told them He must be arrested, He must suffer at the hands of evil men, and that He must die on the cross, He also told them at least three times that He would be raised again on this, the third day. Even without the witness of Mary mother of James and Salome this was plenty of evidence, not to mention the Old Testament Scriptures which prophesied the Messiah would rise from the dead. But none of this computed with Peter. He left puzzled yet unbelieving. However, John we are told, believed. But he doesn't appear ready to speak out about this belief with Peter or the others.

At some point Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb. After Peter and John leave, she peers in and sees two angels sitting where Jesus body had lain, one where His head should be and one where His feet should be, and in between were the undisturbed linen cloths. Mary is weeping, frustrated and saddened over all that has happened. Not only has she failed to prepare her beloved Teacher's body for burial, but now His grave has been desecrated, and there appears nothing she can do about it. In her sorrow Mary doesn't appear phased by the appearance of two men in Jesus' tomb. **John 20:13 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."** So deep in her misery, and unable to grasp what can only be grasped and understood by faith, she remains stuck in the grave robbery scenario. The angels know why she is weeping. Their question is a part of bringing her to realize the truth of the situation. The truth that she cannot see, or grasp, that this is not a time for weeping and wailing. This is a time for worship and celebration! It's the time for the Alleluias to be sung!

John 20:14-15¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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."

Her attention is drawn to someone standing behind her. He did not walk up behind her, He just appeared, or better still He made Himself visible to her. She knows someone is standing there but is unable to discern exactly who it was. Unlike Mary the mother of James and Salome, Jesus' identity has been hidden from her, for now at least. For her the logical explanation is that this is the caretaker of the tomb. And Mary seems to think He may have a part to play in the body's disappearance. Jesus repeats the question of the angels but adds another one, "Whom do you seek?" This is to reorient her. She has been seeking a "what": a corpse. But she should be seeking a "whom" because that corpse has risen again from the dead!

John 20:16-17 ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "**Mary.**" She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "**Rabboni!**" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "**Do not cling to me, for 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.'**" Finally, Jesus completely reveals Himself to her. Finally, things are all falling into place. Jesus did not remain dead but has risen back to life! Imagine how tender our Savior spoke her name, "Mary". Imagine the tears of joy when Mary turned and called Him by the title she knew Him best by from before, "Rabboni, or "Teacher!" She most likely would've fell at His feet and grabbed hold of Him, perhaps in an effort to assure that He would never leave her again.

How and Why Jesus Carefully and Methodically Reveal Himself

But things are radically different now. First of all, Jesus has been raised up in a glorified body. And He has once again assumed the power and authority that are His as God the Son, which He had temporarily set aside in His humiliation, in His coming to serve as our sacrifice for sin. There will be no more walking the dusty roads of Galilee with Him as they did before. Gone are the days of healing and casting out demons one person at a time and doing miracles in one place at a time. He is ascending to the right hand of the Father, from where He will once again rule over the whole world and do so for the sake of His Church.

Mary doesn't need to cling to Him with her hands. He will be clinging to her in a more powerful, supernatural, and intimate way. He will be holding fast to her as His Spirit lives and works within her, giving to her the power faith to hold fast to Him, even when she cannot see Him.

This whole account of Jesus Resurrection unfolded not by chance, but by careful design and planning. In the same way that the Triune God revealed His love for us by His careful, methodical, 6-day creation. That was something He could've done in one day, or one instant, but instead He showed His love for us by creating all things carefully to make this the Paradise where humankind, the crown of His creation, would live forever. Jesus slows down the pace of the revelation of His resurrection to His disciples. He could've been standing there, in the tomb, or by the tomb for all to come and see. But this kind of

revelation would probably have blown their minds. His returning from death to life everlasting was huge! Something they never expected. And it changed everything.

Jesus wanted them to come to terms with it slowly and deliberately. He chose when and where He would be revealed to them. He chose when and where they would see the angels. Angels had always been there with them and with us, but it is only when the Lord decides they should be seen by us that they were revealed. The same is true with Jesus. Mary Magdalene didn't see Him at first when she returned to the tomb not because He wasn't there, but because it was not yet time for her to see Him.

The Apostle Paul in our Epistle Lesson gives a great synopsis of how Jesus progressively revealed Himself as the resurrected Christ. **1 Corinthians 15:3-8** ³ **For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,** ⁴ **that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,** ⁵ **and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.** ⁶ **Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.** ⁷ **Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.** ⁸ **Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.** Slowly, carefully, yet deliberately Jesus reveals to all those who followed Him that He had risen from death, never to die again.

God's salvation plan in Christ Jesus was slowly and methodically revealed in Old Testament prophecies. And it was instituted in the same manner. He sent His only Son from heaven, the divine Son of God becoming the Son of Man, born to the virgin Mary. He was born to go to the cross to suffer and die. And on His way, He slowly and methodically showed Himself to have the same kind of steadfast love, care, almighty power, and divine will to redeem His precious people who had been taken and held captive by sin, just as He had done for Israel, redeeming them from Egypt. Jesus did what no other man could do, suffer and die, and in doing so make satisfaction between sinful man and the Holy God. He took from us all that would bar us from a life to be lived with Him forever. He did so by being the sacrifice that makes us right with God, that makes you right with God. And His resurrection is the crowning victory celebration that He has done all this for all men, including me and you. This is the biggest gift God had ever given mankind since He created the world and gave mankind life. And like all the best gifts He wanted to unwrap it slowly and carefully.

What Does This Mean for Me (And for You)

I've tried to be faithful to that here this morning. I've tried to help you take a new look at this account that you hear every Easter. And I invite you to pause and consider what this means for you. Consider what it means for you that your sins have been paid for, and that you have been made right with God. That one day you will rise from death to life just as Jesus did. That you will stand next to Him on the New Heaven and New Earth with a glorified body that you will live in forever. And that I will join you there, along with all those believers who touched your life in years gone by, and all those yet to come. And best of all, you will live forever with Jesus who made it all possible. Consider what it means that even though you and I continue to sin, that does not negate the power of the cross to remove that sin, or the resurrection promise, that is your inheritance, kept in heaven for you, awaiting that final day. And those times you find yourself weeping and saddened by the events of this world, remember Jesus' question, "Why are you weeping? The Resurrection has changed everything. Consider what it means that Jesus clings to you daily through the Spirit given in your baptism. And that He continues to come to you through the Word and the Sacraments. Consider how much He loves you to do all this for you.

Conclusion

As I thought back on the movie Casablanca, it made me want to watch it again. And perhaps I will sometime this coming week. But in a greater way, I am so thankful that here in July, three months removed from Easter, I was given pause to read, reflect, and meditate on the Resurrection Victory, a story far bigger and far grander than any movie could portray. I am in awe of how carefully Jesus revealed to His disciples this victory of all victories over sin, death, and the devil. I am humbled by His love for me, coming to me in my Baptism, and then again through His Word and Sacrament to grant me faith to believe in His resurrection. I am humbled that He chose to reveal it to me through His Word, and that He continues to reveal Himself to me. I am overjoyed that He continues to call me back from my sinful ways and keep me in faith towards Him. I pray that you have time this day to meditate on the same things. Jesus has revealed His resurrection victory in a very personal and intimate way to you, through His Word and Sacrament. Don't pass by this account too quickly. Meditate on what it means for you today, for all your tomorrows, and what it means for you eternally. Amen.