

On the Run

John 20:1-18

The Feast of Easter\ Year C

April 4, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

People often run with a purpose in mind. We jog for exercise in hopes of keeping ourselves physically fit. If our children should wander out onto a busy street, we dash to rescue them from oncoming traffic. We may even race down the hallway of a trauma center in order to reach a loved one who is critically ill in hopes of offering him or her some consolation. In this morning's reading from Saint John's gospel, Peter and "the other disciple" also run with a purpose. Their aim is to see an empty tomb for themselves. They hope to validate the strange and disturbing news that the grave of Jesus is compromised and open to the sky.

The apostles, however, are not the only people running about within today's gospel lesson. Saint Mary Magdalene, in a rather excitable state, is also dashing to and fro. Her day began much more sedately than that of the two apostles and with considerably less fanfare. She was out of bed long before the first cock crow. The sun had not even begun to flirt with the horizon, when Mary Magdalene decided to pull back the sheets, put her feet in a pair of slippers and rub her eyes in a rather vain effort to loosen the spilled tears which had now congealed into a sandy grit in the corners. Her day commenced in darkness, in the mournful quiet of a night grown old. The stars were just beginning to fade as she set out for the tomb of her Master and friend, a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. We watch as she moves ponderously through the night-shrouded streets in the direction of the cemetery. Her face is grief-stricken and downcast. With her feet encrusted by dust and the hem of her tunic dampened by the dew-laden grass, Mary Magdalene is a sight worthy of our pity. Her behavior, however, warrants nothing short of our shock and consternation. After all, she is an unmarried woman, alone and wandering through a darkened graveyard. She hasn't even given a thought to finding a male chaperone. Her actions are, quite frankly, scandalous. She is running roughshod over all the usual social norms and conventions on which her society is built. A fact which couldn't help but increase her anxiety even as she worried over what she might discover at Christ's grave. That being said, we must give Mary Magdalene credit, for it is she and she alone who demonstrates concern over whether our Lord's corpse has been left undisturbed or perhaps stolen by those who hated him with such passion.

Mary's arrival at the tomb is muted. In the half-light of the early morning, there is only the occasional bird song and the tussling of a gentle breeze. In due course, Mary makes a discovery that seems to confirm her worst fears. The tomb of her Lord and her friend, the tomb of the one she loved, has been tampered with. Someone has unsealed his resting place. Someone has removed the stone blocking the entrance and tossed it aside. She is so heart-broken and appalled, that she doesn't even look inside the tomb. She simply sees, panics and then runs. She is understandably frightened. While Mary Magdalene has demonstrated considerable courage by going alone to the cemetery, she is

not about to rummage around an open grave unaccompanied. She decides to rouse Peter and “the other disciple.” Out of breath, she arrives at the home at which the two men have been staying and tells them: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we have no idea where they have put him.” She assumes that grave robbers have been at work, a reasonable supposition since the burglarizing of tombs was a fairly common occurrence in the ancient world. Mary Magdalene is quite distraught and she wants nothing less than the disciples’ assistance in looking for the pilfered corpse. Peter and “the other disciple” are naturally taken aback. They drop what they are doing, presumably eating their breakfast, and dash back across town toward the tomb. The urgency in their steps reflects the devastating reality that without a body Christ’s followers will be deprived of a focus for their grief. That being said, their unabashed haste could equally be a sign of their fear. With Christ’s body missing, the disciples are faced with not just the possibility but the probability of being accused of plotting to destabilize the local authorities through the perpetration of a tasteless hoax. Is it any wonder then, that in next week’s gospel, we will find the followers of Jesus locked behind closed doors in fear of their lives?

As Mary Magdalene, Peter and “the other disciple” sprint like thoroughbreds in the direction of the tomb, we are told that the “other disciple” pulls ahead of the pack. He reaches to tomb first, but hesitates on entering its confines. Instead, he chooses to wait at the threshold for Peter and Mary Magdalene to arrive. He does, however, take the intervening opportunity to glance inside. The linen wrappings, which once encircled Christ’s body, lie empty. Their precious occupant is gone. The only thing that remains is the heady scent of nard and myrrh. As the “other disciple” turns around, Peter, huffing and puffing, races past him straight into the tomb. The “chief of the apostles” is flushed from overexertion. Once inside, Peter places his hands on his knees and leans forward in an attempt not merely to catch his breath, but to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling. He surveys the contents of the tomb, taking in every detail. He, too, sees the linen wrapping but he also notices something else. The head cloth, which once rested over Jesus’ face, is folded and off to the side. Peter is clearly befuddled. While he may not be positive about much, he is fairly certain that whatever occurred in this tomb was not a grave robbery. Body snatchers do not undress decaying corpses in order to steal them and they certainly don’t undress them and then carefully fold the discarded clothes. Something peculiar is afoot, but Peter, for whatever reason, is unable, at least at this point, to make a leap of faith and entertain the possibility of a resurrection. What Peter is able to see simply makes no sense to him. The same, however, cannot be said for the “other disciple.” He follows Peter into the tomb and, according to Saint John, sees and believes.

What happens next, in this morning’s gospel, borders on the comical. Peter and the “other disciple” are so overcome by what they have seen or not seen, that they race off and leave poor Mary Magdalene in the same position from which she started. She is once again alone in a graveyard. The men have deserted her and left her to her own devices. She remains so angry, frustrated and pained that she doesn’t even seem to notice their departure. Her process of grief has clearly been short-circuited and short-circuited violently. What strikes the casual observer is that there does not appear

to be any hope left within her. Unlike the “other disciple,” she expresses no belief other than her already predetermined assumption. She isn’t even puzzled like Peter. Instead, she is dogmatically certain about what has happened and her certainty tells her that dead bodies don’t get up and walk about on their own. She takes one look at the empty tomb and can only assume the worst. She is fixated on Jesus corpse, presumably because she thinks that his corpse is all she has left of him. Her world has narrowed to such a point that she is incapable of receiving comfort from anything other than holding onto his rotting body. In her present condition, she is so blinded that even the sudden appearance of angels in the tomb can do little to redeem her vision. “Woman, why are you weeping” the angels ask her as she stoops down and peers inside the cave-like entrance. Not missing a beat, Mary Magdalene, can only repeat her persistent mantra: “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” The sound of her voice betrays her singleness of purpose, her determination to locate her Master’s body. Nothing said or done seems to fully grab her attention or break the strange routine in which she has imprisoned herself. Even when she is finally able to notice a person standing behind her, she doesn’t really look at him. Instead, she assumes that he is merely the gardener and, more to the point, that he is somehow involved in the plot to steal Jesus from her.

“Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” the gardener asks. Mary Magdalene, her voice frantic, responds: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away?” Her words reveal her increasingly tenuous grip on the situation if not on reality itself. After all, how in the world, is she planning on moving the dead weight of a corpse about on her own? Over her shoulder? A wheel-barrow, perhaps? What is even more striking is how she completely misses the gardener’s question? Earlier, in John’s gospel, Jesus asks the two disciples who have been sent to him by John the Baptist whom they are looking for. His question is not intended to gather information, but to pose an invitation. He is inviting these two disciples to a greater life of intimacy and obedience. Jesus is offering Mary Magdalene the same invitation. Unfortunately, she fails to see what is being offered.. She remains trapped by her own preconceptions. Like so many others (and not unlike many of us sitting here), Mary tries to make Jesus into who she wants him to be, into whom she needs him to be. If she vaguely senses that he somehow transcends not only our human ability to understand him including our relationship with him, she makes no attempt to explore such an intuition. A corpse, as sad as it is, is something she can hold onto. A corpse is something to which she can tie her sorrows. If she can capture Jesus within her thoughts, memories and assumptions, then she can keep him safely confined and unconsciously manipulated. She can keep him, in an odd sense, to herself. Jesus, however, will not permit her to engage in such deluded behavior.

“Mary” the gardener says. He speaks her name with a commanding presence. With one word, he manages to wake her up from the sleep of night in which she has been operating all morning. This is the moment when the dawn of Easter finally breaks for Mary Magdalene. The gardener rouses her from the death which has been consuming her. She can now hear him and recognize him in a way she had not been able to hear him or recognize him before. “Rabbouni- Teacher!” she cries. She attempts to put her

arms around him only to be met by a series of words difficult to hear. “Do not lay hold of me” Christ tells us, “Do not cling to me.” But why? Is it simply because he has not yet ascended to the Father or is there more to it than that? One suspects that Christ’s command “not to hold him” is his manner of weaning us away from all those carefully constructed ideas we have of who he is. Christ will not be imprisoned by our systems or even by our best attempts at wishful thinking. He will not allow us to turn him into a genie in a bottle or into one more decaying thing to be revered. He is alive, active and resurrected. He refuses Mary’s prior claim upon him just as he refuses any of the prior claims that we can offer. We do not get to control our relationship with him. In fact, whatever personal relationship we have with this Jesus, gets swallowed up into the much larger relationship of community. A notion underscored by Christ’s refusal to allow her to tarry alone with him in the garden. Instead, he tells her to “go to his brothers” and tell them that he is ascending to his father and to our father, to his God and to our God. As cryptic as some of these words may appear, he is simply telling us that if we wish to know him, then we must come to know him as he is in relationship to God his father. This is the same relationship, to which, he has been inviting us all along, to share and live with him as he dwells with his Father.

Christ is not being cruel to Mary. He is not rejecting her desire for intimacy anymore than he is rejecting our own. Instead, he is reframing our wants and our needs. He is teaching us that true intimacy with him can only be found within the greater intimacy which exists between himself and his father and between himself and the community he is calling into being, the community we call church. He is trying to draw us beyond what we want him to be into the deeper reality of who he is. He is attempting to rescue us from our old ideas and our old ways of relating. He is attempting to resurrect us from our preoccupations with the things of death. He is offering us new life.

Despite all the racing back and forth this morning, belief in the resurrection, is not a short run to a simple goal. Rather, faith in the resurrection, let alone coming to terms with what the resurrection means for our lives, is the journey of a lifetime- a lifetime spent peering not into empty tombs but by bearing witness to those who have become fully alive through the power of Christ’s rising. While we can never completely understand the resurrection, we can believe it and we can live into it. So, on this Easter Sunday, let us run with a purpose. Let us encounter the risen Lord in one another. Let us manifest his presence in the many ways in which we live our lives and live into our baptism. Let us make the risen Lord known through the ways in which we forgive one another, through the ways in which we care for those in need, through the ways in which we become a healing presence for those who are troubled, through the ways in which we encourage people to entertain a new purpose in their life, through the ways in which we work for justice and peace. Let us not merely believe the resurrection, let us, as individuals and as a community, be the resurrection, of which Christ, for all of us, is the first fruits.