

*We Are Forgiven!*

John 20:1-18

23 March 2008

Easter Sunday

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. No one else was there, neither the throng that had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem just one week earlier, nor the mob that called for this death three days ago. No disciples, because they were all hiding in fear for their lives. No high priests or Roman soldiers, because they'd finished what they had set out to accomplish. Jesus was dead. Executed on a Friday, just a few hours before the setting sun heralded the beginning of the Sabbath. For twenty-four hours there could be no grief or mourning. But on the first day of the week, Mary rose early while it was still dark, as if eager to resume her work of mourning Jesus' death.

During this Lenten season we have been studying the issue of forgiveness, something which is at the heart of what it means to be Christian, yet which we all too often feel woefully unprepared to actually live in our everyday lives. Over the past weeks we have talked about the wrongs we mortals do to one another, both petty and profound, both personal and political. Ironically, that human level of sin and forgiveness has seldom been treated in any depth in the Christian tradition. Instead, Christianity has focused on our sins against God. I haven't addressed that aspect in my sermon series, but that's because it's what Easter is all about. The sins we commit against God are related to the sins we commit against one another, but it is hard for us to see that. It's hard to see how forgiveness in one context is bound to forgiveness in the other, even though the Lord's Prayer reminds us of it every Sunday.

Even in the story of Easter we still miss the connection. We know that the cross represents the worst crime we could commit against God: the murder of God's own son. We know that on the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." We know that the empty tomb on Easter morning represents God's forgiveness for our sin.

But do we truly understand how we remain bound by our ongoing unwillingness to forgive? How is it that God can forgive us for the death of Jesus, yet we can hold on so tightly to our own anger against those who have wronged us? Of course God forgives us for such a crime, but if I were to forgive that jerk who wounded me last week, that would be a travesty of justice! Forgiveness: it's good enough for God, but not good enough for me! So much pretty words in church, but forgiveness has nothing to do with the real world, right? It's impractical, it's unjust. Forgiveness denies the seriousness of the crime. It doesn't fix anything, anyway. So we cling to our unwillingness to forgive, we hold on to the wrongs done to us, and we don't see how in doing so we hold on to death. For unforgiven wrongs are a kind of death, an end to a relationship that has been broken, of hopes that have been betrayed, of justice that has been denied, of love that has been destroyed. In the face of these crimes, forgiveness seems weak, even powerless. We simply cannot see the truth, that forgiveness is the power of the resurrection.

This Easter morning, then, let us join Mary Magdalene on her solitary walk to the tomb, a walk made while it is still dark. There are many wrongs in the crucifixion story, but Mary did not commit them. She is the only person named by all four gospels as being present both at the crucifixion and at the resurrection. When others abandoned Jesus, she did not. She remained faithful and loyal.

Yet she too is bound by the inability to forgive. We find her returning to the tomb, the way we return to our own grievance stories, rehearsing the wrongs that have been done to us, keeping our pain alive by nursing and nurturing it. In the same way, Mary returns to the tomb, the scene of the crime as it were. The tomb is like a wound, the stone that covers it like a bandage. We cover up our wounds, but the injury is still there. How many of us pick at those wounds, peeling back the bandage to look at the source of our pain? So Mary, too, is bound to this fascination with death, this belief that forgiveness cannot heal such a wound as this.

She comes and finds the tomb disturbed, the stone removed, the body missing, and she thinks that another crime has been committed. She has made the place of death into something holy, and now she believes it has been desecrated. So wrapped up is Mary in her own grief and outrage that she fails to recognize what is right before her – Jesus himself. That is a lesson we all would do well to heed! How do we let our anger blind us to the gospel truth that is literally staring us in the face? When we let ourselves become entranced by the power of our own outrage and grief, making it into something almost sacred, do we end up missing out on a greater power? It's not devotion; it's blindness! Mary is so distracted that she doesn't recognize Jesus even when he starts up a conversation with her.

So how then does Jesus end up identifying himself to her? It turns out he doesn't. He never tells her who he is. He never says, "Yo, Mary, it's me, Jesus!" Instead, he identifies her. The name he speaks is hers. He calls her by name. He calls her back to herself. He recalls her own hopes and dreams that had been shattered by his murder. He restores the relationship that she thought had been utterly destroyed by his death.

Remember what Fred Luskin of the Stanford Forgiveness Project said about how forgiveness heals us. When we are wronged, we see ourselves as victims. We become trapped in all those negative emotions, powerless to save or heal ourselves. But forgiveness restores us to the person we were before the crime was committed. Forgiveness reconnects us to our own hopes and dreams, and enables us to hope and dream again. It empowers us to pursue those hopes and dreams once more.

But more than that, forgiveness in its most complete form also restores the offender, the sinner, to who they were before their fall from grace. Forgiveness restores, it heals, it raises us to new life. Indeed, forgiveness is a new creation!

This, then, is the power of the resurrection. It is the power to restore us to all we were before our own fall, to reconnect us to the hopes that we feared were too weak and naïve for this world. So on this Easter day, let us ask ourselves: what dreams have we given up on? What hopes have we thought were long gone? What *do* we hope for in our hearts, perhaps buried so deeply under our own fears that we've all but forgotten them? What do we hope for in our lives? What do we hope for our families? For our communities? For our nation? What dreams do we have for our church? For our world?

Friends, the tomb is empty! Death has fled! The stone has been rolled away, and the power of the resurrection has been loosed upon the world, the power of forgiveness which restores our souls and resurrects our hopes and enables us to turn enemies into friends. Let us not doubt the power of that forgiveness. Rather, let us set all our hopes upon it. This power is ours! Jesus himself said that those who believe as he does will not only do the things he did, but will in fact do even greater things! Are our hopes big enough for such a promise?