

“If I Only Had One Sermon to Preach”

John 20:1-18

Easter, March 27, 2016

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If I only had one sermon to preach, I would choose to preach it on an Easter morning. I read an article last week in *The Christian Century* that reminded me of the story of the scientist from the California Institute of Technology’s discovery of Planet Nine back in January. A new planet in our solar system, wow! They estimate that it has 10 times greater mass than earth and that it is 50 billion miles away. Now, the only catch is no one has actually seen Planet Nine. They haven’t found it in a telescope even Hubble hasn’t found it. No one has seen it but they know it is there. “It must be there,” said one astronomer. “Nothing else could exert such influence” on our universe unless a planet is out there.

Isn’t that essentially the message of Easter? The women, Mary Magdalene and the others who went with her knew the facts. They had seen Joseph of Arimathea place the body of Jesus in the tomb and had watched the guards roll the stone in place and seal it up. They knew where the body of Jesus was. They knew who they were looking for and where to find him. (*The Christian Century*, March 16, 2016, Shawanthea Monroe, pg. 22)

Grief and loneliness are light sleepers, you can guess they had been up off and on all night preparing the special spices to anoint the body, a common practice then, a sure sign that they loved him. The Scripture says it was still dark when they got there.

So tragic the way it had ended. They had all hoped for so much more. Emil Brunner wrote, “What oxygen is to the lungs so is hope for the meaning of life.” They were suffocating with an overdose of despair. All their dreams of glory, all their national aspirations, all their hopes for the future were annihilated out there on the hill in the hot sun of Golgatha. The one remaining symbol of all they longed for was lying there in the tomb. Imagine how empty they felt, sometime before the dawn, how crushed. If you have ever lost someone you loved too much to lose, someone who was your whole life and future ... you already know how they felt.

At that hour, all of Jerusalem was still sleeping. It had been a marvelous busy and successful Passover holiday. No one was there to monitor the breaking news, no CNN reporters on the spot, as they were on Tuesday morning in Brussels to announce the horrific news of violence. No camera crew, no one to announce to the world, no one got the scoop. There were no eye witnesses, at all. The most sacred and important moment in all of history belonged to no one in particular; maybe because it belongs to everyone in general. It came when they least expected it. It came without fanfare or announcement, when everyone else was thinking and planning on doing something else. All of Jerusalem missed it that morning. Even the guards on duty at Joseph’s tomb in the Garden had fallen asleep.

Now don’t get bogged down in all the hows and whys and whethers of what actually happened, or how it fits in with the others things you think you know. It wouldn’t do much good anyway. I

admit as a theologian that there are many unanswered questions in the gospels, a ton of loose ends to tie down. It is enough to say that while it is shrouded in mystery, something marvelous and magnificent took place. Those who had known and loved the Lord came to believe that he had risen; they acted upon it completely, and with unbounded devotion, even if one disciple, Thomas, held out for more than a week. The course of Western Civilization and all history to follow went off in a new direction. You can't imagine them giving up everything to follow a hoax; can you? "If Christ is not raised," wrote St. Paul, "Our faith is in vain."

Easter is a time to rejoice, to acknowledge what God has done in His world. And, it is His world. Not that he marshals every tiny movement and each segment into his own irrevocable pattern, parceling out triumph to some and tragedy to others. No, there is free will and choice for each of us. We cannot speak of the Will of God that way. God never promised that he would save us from trouble He promised that he would save us from defeat. Whatever happens here must be seen and judged against the ultimate sense of what the world is intended to be. We can say this much for sure, but only this much: in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God triumphed over evil, Justice overcame discrimination, Love vanquished hate, Life conquered death. Easter morning triumphed over Good Friday afternoon. That much we can say for sure. The rest belongs to God, who in his own good time will make it known.

"Sometimes," Ralph Waldo Emerson is speaking, "Things seem to be in the saddle and ride humankind." Things like guns and sticks and stone and fists and accidents, airplane crashes, earthquakes, wind and fire. Sometimes we have to grope around in the dark.

It was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and whoever else was there who went up to the tomb. This lonely little group of followers was left to sail the mighty sea, their boat adrift, the rudder broken and the Captain dead. All the strong disciples, the ones who bragged about how faithful they would be, were hiding somewhere scared to death. How sad and tragic and hopeless it looked as the women sauntered up with their little jars of spices. Notice that it took some women to gather up the courage to go.

They wondered and worried about how they would manage a life that would be so empty. They were also wondering who would roll away the stone. I think they missed it at first, eyes filled with tears, heads bowed down not wanting to see ... and then suddenly nothing to see as the tomb was empty. Even when Jesus finally stood there right beside them, they didn't recognize him at first. They were so sure of their worries, so wound up with what was happening in the small corners of their own wee world, so afraid and troubled, so angry at what was going on, so aware that the world can be a dreadful place, they almost missed it. The sun had risen, daybreak had arrived, the night was over, but their heads were so low in grief they had trouble noticing it. I wouldn't want you to miss it today. We all need an Easter message.

It was Father Teilhard de Chardin, in the midst of all his weighty paleontology and philosophy who caught it one day. "To see," he wrote, "We might say that the whole of life lies in that one verb, 'to see;' to see or to perish is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe." It was true in the rugged jungle, when you had to be able to see what was coming to know whether to run away. It was true in the time of Abraham when you had to see your way down the valley where God commanded you to go. It was true in the time of the exile, when they

had to see through the captivity of Babylon to have the patience to wait and to return home as God had promised. It was true all through the agony of Golgotha. It was also true for the woman that Easter morning just before the dawn.

Thoreau said it half a century before Teilhard. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." Only that day dawns to which we are awake. The only sunrise you will ever see is one where you are up and looking. I hope you are awake to this one. But if you get so wound up or wound down, I should say, in all the ordinary events of our workaday worlds, in the petty complaints that everything is not done the way you want it, if you make this Christian faith just a memory of what it once was, if you try to keep it within the boundaries of what your soul and psyche can manage to describe and believe; something which your own little brain can comprehend, then you will miss it. You will walk right by it. It's too big, too stupendous, too wide and deep and high for you alone.

Well it is time to go ... enough though it is early, the morning wears on. It won't be long until Jerusalem is awake and churning. But remember, already out on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, there was a young woman you and I have come to know by name, on this and every other Easter morning; racing down that dusty little path with all her might, moving so fast you might want to reach out and slow her down lest she stumbles and falls, heading toward home to tell the others of the one and only news she had to tell.

Oh, I love that scene ... carried in the hint of that early dawn, lifted up above herself, so much so that her feet would never touch the ground again in all her life; flying down the path with a show of the blue heaven in her eyes ... watch that young woman in white, with her shiny, raven hair streaming behind her in the breeze, swinging back now and then into those believing open eyes, which just a moment before were moist with tears when she could not find the body of her Lord. Oh, just watch her there, lifted on the wings of the morning which she had greeted sometime before the dawn, a fresh new day, watch her running, bounding, fair fleeing down the hillside, and listen one last time to the words you need to hear once more.

Listen to the shortest sweetest loveliest finest and best little Easter sermon which anyone has ever heard, the one sermon I would always choose to preach, "Oh, my God," she's saying, as she runs, "Oh dear God, it's true. He's here I saw him ... I actually saw him ... he's alive. He looked into my eyes, I saw him. He lives. He's alive. It's true. I saw him. Jesus Christ is Risen from the Dead!"