

What Brings You Here Today? Easter, April 24, 2011

What brings you here today?

Yes, I do know it's Easter, but what about that brings you here today? Is it curiosity? Are you wondering how this great festival day plays out in this particular parish, or what kind of new dress the lady who always sits in front of you will be wearing? Is it because you heard a trumpeter is going to play or that the choir is going to sing a special song? Did you come because a dear friend or a relative or your parent asked you to? Did you come to see the flowers and the vestments, to smell the incense, to move with the crowd into the church, down the aisle, up to the altar rail, then down on your knees, and finally out into the world again?

Maybe you come today because Aidan is going to be baptized. Maybe some of you even came hoping to hear something that matters to your life. Maybe you came to be with kind people, who know that life is for loving, celebrating, seeking God together? Do you come for an answer to the problem of suffering and death?

Why, really, did you come here, *now*, after the dear intimacy of that supper, after the ruthless crowd held him captive, after his almost-deserted, cruel death, after his being sealed away in stone? Why, really, did you come this Easter morning? Did you come simply because you love Jesus, and you want to be near him, and you know that these gardens look a little like the one in which his body was laid?

Whatever reason is yours, good for you! Those are all good reasons. God will work with every one of them. Those are *all* good reasons.

They're certainly as good as Mary Magdalene's reason for approaching the tomb while it is still dark. My guess is, she isn't quite sure herself why she comes here this morning. She just knows that she loves Jesus, still, wants to be near him,

even after standing near his cross Friday as he died. She knows she was privileged to be there when Jesus gave his mother into the beloved disciple's care and the disciple into his mother's care. What a treasure for her to be standing there at the cross when Jesus established a new family, and for her to be part of this new community, based solely on loving Jesus and taking his family to be our own.

We don't know exactly why Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early this morning, while it is still dark, but we do know that when she saw the stone had been removed, she ran to Peter and the beloved disciples and told them, because they belonged to Jesus, too. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," she reports. It's "them" and "us," in her mind. *Them* includes the ones who confidently turned him over to the authorities; judged him guilty; mocked, scourged, and pierced him. "Them" means the ones who want to be rid of him, done with him, the ones who have turned a deaf ear and kept heading the other direction. "Us" means the ones who want to be with him, whether we are brave enough to show it or not.

As far as we can tell, Mary Magdalene shows up this morning because she wants to be near Jesus, regardless of whether he is alive or dead. As far as we can tell, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb because she wants to be near Jesus, whether that means grieving, rejoicing, or just wrestling with her confusion. She comes to the tomb because, somehow or other, she belongs to him.

It's a shock, then, when Mary finds that Jesus' tomb is open. That shock sends her running to tell Peter and John that his body is missing. And even though eager Simon Peter steps in to see the linens Jesus had been wrapped in, neatly rolled up, and even though insightful John takes that to mean that, somehow, God is still at work in Jesus, none of the three, understand what is going on. Neither Mary nor Peter nor John really *understands* about resurrection. The men simply go home; they get as far away from the confusion and pain as they can get. But Mary

Magdalene returns.

She is so *drawn* here, so drawn here. She just stands weeping outside the tomb, present to this place where he is hidden from her. The Rabbi was all about life, you see, and love and freedom from the push and pull of public opinion. Is it possible, she wonders, that there's some token of him left in the tomb, something she can hang on to? She bends over to look. Two angels are sitting there— bearers of good news, but they don't seem to dispel her sadness or her quandary about where he can possibly be. “*They* have taken him away, and I do not know where “*they*” have laid him,” she says. Mary wants to get her hands on Jesus' body, if someone will just tell her where it is. Still weeping, she turns and sees a man. Might this gardener know?

He says to her, “Mary!” and she turns and says, “My dear teacher!” He says to *her*, “Mary!” and *she* turns and says, “My dear teacher!” It's the only conversation they really need. “Mary” and “My dear teacher.” That's the only explanation that rescues us from grief, isn't it? Hearing the beloved's voice in our heart of hearts, hearing our true name called out in love and longing. “Do not hold on to me, do not cling to me,” Jesus says, “I have not yet ascended to my father and yours. Go tell that to my brothers.”

Mary has no more need for longing, no more need to stay at the tomb, no more need for weeping, no more need for questions, no more need to cling. She proclaims the truth she sees, now that it is daylight: “I have seen the Lord!”

No matter why you came here this morning, it's a good-enough reason. No matter why you came here this morning, God will work with your response. We are in good company with our wondering, with our hesitation, even with our doubt about the past week's events. We have good company here in the shadowy almost-dawn. Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple, because he was afraid of his religious neighbors. Nicodemus at first came to Jesus only under cover of

darkness, because he was too learned too fearful of being wrong just to fall in love and follow him. And these two ended up claiming his body for burial--wrapping it in fresh linen, with an extravagant weight of spices, and placing it in a brand new tomb. Thomas will soon ask to touch Jesus' wounds in order to trust what he has heard from his best friends. But when he, like Mary, sees with Jesus with his own eyes and hears Jesus' voice welcoming him— "come and put your hand here,"-- he knows, he just knows. "My Lord and my God!" he responds. "My Lord and my God!"

There's so much about this whole crucifixion-resurrection event we don't understand. Why did all this happen? What is resurrection anyway? When and where does it occur? To whom? We are as much in the dark as Joseph and Nicodemus and Thomas and Mary Magdalene. We haven't understood the signs of water and wine, bread and sheep, any more than the crowds did. We aren't sure about who this man really is and where he comes from, as Pilate wanted to know. We don't know just how seriously to take his life, death, and resurrection--we don't have all the facts.

We want answers to the questions a reporter would ask: *who, what, when, where, how, and why?* We want to cling to some kind of proof about him and carry it around with us as a cure for our fears. We're afraid that if we don't have all these answers, we might do something stupid, something embarrassing, something we couldn't explain, something our crowd might condemn. Like love him, follow him, no matter where it leads.

You know, we are all like Mary Magdalene. We are here because in one way or another, Jesus calls to us. Somehow, Jesus touches the essential truth of who we are and says, "Come, I love you. Fear not. Follow me." Somehow Jesus touches our deepest joys and pains and hopes. That's the best proof there is of his Risen Presence, the most constant cure for our fears as we walk through our own

Jerusems and Gethsemanes and Golgothas. Jesus knows *us*, our particular joys and sorrows. Not knows *about* them. *Knows* them. He knows our truest name, and calls it as if we matter, because we do. Maybe for the first time ever, this morning, we believe it. How could we resist the voice who knows us better than we know ourselves, and love us better than we are able to? Like Mary, one way or another, we turn toward him, we move toward him, and we find our way into beloved community.

We all come to Jesus by night, at first, before the sun rises, barely seeing at all. We move in hope or maybe desperation toward a bright spot on the horizon, toward a flame that seems more alive than we are. One day when we cannot explain our life's pains and ecstasies by a list of facts, we hear our name, and we turn toward it. Gradually, we discover we're in a garden as fresh as Creation, where all the tombs are unused. Everyone here is family, brothers and sisters of the Gardener. We are the dear disciples of this dearest Teacher, the One who has called us here. He speaks our name this morning—*Tom, Jane, Sally, David*—and his voice resounds deep within us, like love touching a wound.

Why have we come here this morning? Well, it's early yet, a new day is just dawning. We'll have to see what we learn to see. But it will be enough.