

Mark 16: 1-8

JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN! IT IS THE VERY HEART OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH: THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE WORLD-CHANGING IMPLICATIONS. AND SO, FROM THE BEGINNING, IT HAS BEEN OUR MOST IMPORTANT CELEBRATION. CHURCHES ARE FILLED TO CAPACITY ALL OVER THE WORLD TODAY. THE MUSIC IS MAGNIFICENT AND THE LILIES BEAUTIFUL. WE HAVE GATHERED TO SEEK MEANING. IT IS THE HOW THE CHRISTIAN STORY BEGINS. THE FIRST WORDS JESUS SAYS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN ARE: “WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” THEY ARE THE VERY SAME WORDS HE SAYS TO A WOMAN WEeping IN A GARDEN ON THE FIRST EASTER MORNING. “WHY ARE YOU WEeping? WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

HER NAME IS MARY MAGDALENE. SHE IS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS, A DISCIPLE. BUT IN HISTORY SHE IS CONFUSED WITH OTHER WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT MARY WAS ANYTHING OTHER THAN AN EXTRAORDINARY COURAGEOUS AND DEVOTED FOLLOWER OF JESUS. SHE HAD DEMONS, THE BIBLE SAYS, SEVEN OF THEM, AND JESUS CAST THEM OUT, HELPED HER THROUGH WHAT TODAY WE MIGHT CALL A TIME OF MENTAL ILLNESS. AND THEN SHE FOLLOWED HIM.

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, MARY RETURNS TO THE TOMB. THE SUN IS NOT UP YET. IT IS BEFORE DAWN WHEN IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE CLEARLY. THE TOMB SHE HAD SEEN SEALED BEFORE NOW SHE LOOKS IN. THE BODY OF JESUS IS GONE. IT IS A FINAL INSULT: SOMEONE HAS STOLEN THE BODY, AND WHO KNOWS WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO DO WITH IT. THIS GENTLE, LOVING, MAN IS DENIED EVEN A PEACEFUL RESTING PLACE. SHE WEEPS TEARS OF GRIEF AND BITTERNESS AND RETURNS TO TELL THE SLEEPING DISCIPLES THAT HIS BODY IS GONE.

AFTER PETER AND JOHN HAVE SEEN FOR THEMSELVES AND RETURNED HOME, MARY GOES BACK TO THE GARDEN. IT IS STILL DARK. BUT NOW SOMEONE IS THERE. THE GARDENER, SHE THINKS. HE ASKS, “WHY ARE YOU WEeping? WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” IT ALL SPILLS OUT---HOW HE WAS ARRESTED, TRIED, CRUCIFIED, AND NOW SOMEONE HAS TAKEN AWAY HIS BODY. “IF YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS, PLEASE TELL ME, AND I WILL BRING HIM BACK HERE.” HE SPEAKS HER NAME, “MARY.” SHE RECOGNIZES HIM—IT IS JESUS. THE WORLD SHIFTS ON ITS AXIS. SHE TRIES TO EMBRACE HIM. “DO NOT CLING TO ME. GO TELL THE OTHERS.” AND NOW MARY RUNS, FLINGS OPEN THE DOOR: “I HAVE SEEN THE LORD.” THE WORLD SHIFTS. THE FIRST DAY OF A NEW LIFE BEGINS. IT IS DAWN NOW, AND THE SUN IS SHINING ON A WORLD SUDDENLY BRAND NEW, A WORLD IN WHICH DEATH HAS BEEN DEFEATED, OVERCOME BY LIFE.

MARY’S EXPERIENCE IN THE GARDEN WAS NOT ABSTRACT OR INTELLECTUAL. QUITE TO THE CONTRARY, THE SCENE BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM IS HUMAN, EMOTIONAL, AND DEEPLY,

DEEPLY PERSONAL. FOR MARY, FAITH IN JESUS WAS BASED NOT ON IDEAS OR PRINCIPLES BUT A PRESENCE SHE COULD EXPERIENCE THROUGH HER SENSES, ONE SHE SAW AND HEARD AND TOUCHED BUT COULD NOT CLING TO. IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS THAT PERSONAL?

JESUS KNEW MARY'S NAME...HE KNEW HER. THERE WAS A RELATIONSHIP. DEEP IN OUR HEARTS WE LONG TO KNOW AND TO BE KNOWN. WE LONG TO HEAR, TO HEAR JESUS SAY OUR NAME. JESUS YEARN'S TO COME AS A PRESENCE THAT REACHES BEYOND OUR MINDS AND TOUCHES OUR LIVES IN WAYS THAT ARE FELT, TOUCHED, TASTED, SMELLED, HEARD, AND SEEN. JESUS COMES AS WE PUT OUR BODIES INTO OUR FAMILIAR PEW; FEEL THE HYMNBOOK AND BIBLE IN OUR HANDS; LIFT OUR VOICES IN A HYMN THAT RESONATES DEEPLY IN OUR SOULS; AS WE TASTE THE BREAD, THE WINE. JESUS, THE RISEN CHRIST, COMES IN OUR LIVES IN THE WORLD, IN OUR WORK, OUR DEAREST LOVES, IN OUR FRIENDSHIPS, IN NATURE. DON'T JUST *THINK* ABOUT IT THIS EASTER MORNING. "O TASTE AND SEE," THE PSALMS SAY, THAT THE LORD IS GOOD. HE IS RISEN INDEED.

WORDS SIMPLY ARE NOT BIG ENOUGH TO FULLY CAPTURE THE MIRACLE THAT DEATH DID NOT HOLD HIM, THAT DEATH WAS NOT THE END, NOT THE LAST WORD FOR HIM OR FOR US.

THERE IS PLENTY OF WEEPING. THERE IS PLENTY OF DEATH. SOMETIMES LIFE SEEMS LIKE A SERIES OF FUNERALS, A REALITY THAT BECOMES MORE REAL THE OLDER YOU BECOME. OFTEN OUR PRAYERS TURN INTO ONE LONG LITANY OF SADNESS AND PROBLEMS AND WE FORGET TO HOPE. WE DON'T ALLOW OURSELVES TO GO THERE.

AND YET IF GOD WANTS US TO BE PERMANENTLY MOURNFUL, WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD GOD GIVE US BEAUTY? WHY THE LOVE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS? WHY THE FIRST SMILE OF A BABY, A LITTLE ONE'S HAND IN YOUR OWN, WHY EXTRAVAGANTLY BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS AND A WARM SUN, WHY BACH AND HANDEL AND MOZART? SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE WORLD FROM ONE ANGLE, IT'S ALMOST AS IF GOD WANTS US TO BE HAPPY.

YEARS AGO AFTER RETURNING FROM A MISSION TRIP TO HAITI, I REMEMBER SHARING HOW IT WASN'T THE INDECRIBABLE POVERTY OR SUFFERING I WOULD REMEMBER, BUT THE LAUGHTER OF THE CHILDREN AND THEIR UNENDING SINGING. AND THEN SEEING ON THE NEWS SOMETIME LATER THAT AS DARKNESS FELL ON PORT-AU-PRINCE ON THE NIGHT OF THE TRAGIC EARTHQUAKE, IT HAPPENED AGAIN. THERE WAS THE SOUND OF CHILDREN LAUGHING AND PEOPLE IN THE STREETS, SINGING HYMNS, PRAYING ALOUD, SINGING THROUGH TEARS. THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE DO WHO KNOW ABOUT THE RESURRECTION. I PRAY THAT STRENGTH, COURAGE AND HOPE CONTINUES IN THE HAITIAN PEOPLE. SINGING AND PRAYING; BELIEVING IN THE RISEN CHRIST.

THE SINGING BEGAN IN A GARDEN LONG AGO, BEFORE DAWN, WHEN MARY, WEEPING, DEVASTATED—AS WE ARE SOMETIMES, FREQUENTLY IN FACT, BY THE RANDOMNESS OF EVIL AND DEATH IN THE WORLD—HEARD JESUS SAY HER NAME AND KNEW IN WAYS SHE DID NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND, AT A PLACE DEEP IN HER SOUL, THAT HE WAS THE VICTOR, NOT DEATH; THAT THE LAST WORD ABOUT HIM WAS NOT DEATH BUT LIFE AND LOVE; THAT THE MEANING SHE AND EVERYONE OF US LONGS FOR WAS IN HIM, A RISEN LORD WHO OVERCAME DEATH. NEW LIFE BEGAN AT FIRST LIGHT ON EASTER MORNING.

PLEASE KNOW ON THIS EASTER MORNING THAT WHATEVER IS HAPPENING IN YOUR LIFE TODAY, WHATEVER YOU ARE DEALING WITH, WORRIED ABOUT, STRUGGLING WITH, WEEPING OVER, THERE IS A POWER ALIVE AND AT WORK IN THE WORLD, IN HEAVEN AND IN YOU. IT IS ON YOUR SIDE; IT WILL HOLD YOU UP. IT IS THE POWER OF RESURRECTION...THE POWER OF NEW LIFE AND LOVE. JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN. CAN YOU HEAR HIM CALLING YOUR NAME?

PLEASE KNOW THAT WHATEVER YOU ARE AFRAID OF TODAY, TOMORROW, IN THE FUTURE--- THERE IS NOTHING ULTIMATELY TO FEAR. JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN.

AND PLEASE KNOW THAT THOUGH DEATH IS REAL, MORE REAL IS A LOVE FROM WHICH NOTHING, NOT EVEN DEATH, WILL EVER SEPARATE YOU, AND SO YOU CAN CONFIDENTLY ENTRUST YOUR LIFE TO HIM.

I HEARD A SONG YESTERDAY WHILE LISTENING TO A RADIO STATION I SELDOM, IF EVER LISTEN TO. THE WORDS GRABBED ME SO I TURNED THE RADIO UP...THE WORDS PERHAPS SPEAKING TO MARY'S EXPERIENCE IN THE GARDEN. THE SONG'S TITLE IS: "THANK GOD I DO" BY LAUREN DAIGLE. I ENCOURAGE YOU TO GOOGLE IT AND LISTEN TO ITS ENTIRITY BUT ALLOW ME TO SHARE A FEW OF THE VERSES:

I'VE SEEN LOVE COME AND I'VE SEEN LOVE WALK AWAY; SO MANY QUESTIONS, WILL ANYBODY STAY? IT'S BEEN A HARD YEAR; SO MANY NIGHTS IN TEARS; ALL OF THE DARKNESS, TRYING TO FIGHT MY FEARS; ALONE, SO LONG ALONE. I DON'T KNOW WHO I'D BE IF I DIDN'T KNOW YOU; I'D PROBABLY FALL OFF THE EDGE; I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'D GO IF YOU EVER LET GO; SO KEEP ME HELD IN YOUR HANDS. I'VE STARTED BREATHING, THE WEIGHT IS LIFTED HERE. WITH YOU, IT'S EASY; MY HEAD IS FINALLY CLEAR. THERE'S NOTHING MISSING WHEN YOU ARE BY MY SIDE; I TOOK THE LONG ROAD BUT NOW I REALIZE I'M HOME WITH YOU, I'M HOME.

YOU'RE MY SAFE PLACE; MY HIDEAWAY; YOU'RE MY ANCHOR; MY SAVING GRACE; YOU'RE MY CONSTANT; MY STEADINESS; YOU'RE MY SHELTER; MY OXYGEN. I DON'T KNOW WHO I'D BE IF I DIDN'T KNOW YOU. THANK GOD I DO.

**WHO WOULD YOU BE IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW JESUS? WHO WOULD I BE IF I DIDN'T KNOW
JESUS? THANK GOD YOU DO! THANK GOD I DO! JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN! HE'S RISEN!
HALLELUIAH! AMEN!**