

Lydia Harder Neufeld, Easter, April 20, 2014

“Encountering God: Hearing our Name”

John 20: 1-18

Today is a day of wonder! A day of Joy! A day of gladness!

Yet it did not begin that way for the followers of Jesus who first proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead. In fact, no-one would have predicted that the day would turn out as it did. (That is, no-one but Jesus—but who can remember his words, when one’s whole life is turned upside down?) We have already been invited to enter the story of Jesus as told by John at the Good Friday service. As we identified with the characters and entered the drama, we too entered a time of reflection on the sorrow and utter despair that so much betrayal and violence can bring. We know deep within ourselves that this celebration should not be taking place these more than 2000 years later. After all, Jesus is dead and his followers are scattered, each of them alone in their anguish.

Unable to eat and sleep they wept, unable even to talk about their dreams now shattered, their hopes dismissed, their community destroyed, their very reason for life gone forever. Like people today, I can imagine that different people had different reactions and responded to Jesus’ death in different ways. Some by weeping aloud, others by moving into their own space of sorrow, some full of anger at the injustice, still others seeking the love of those around them to give them comfort. None could be satisfied with a rational explanation of why Jesus had to die. All were deeply affected by the traumatic death of their friend, their leader, their teacher.

The female followers of Jesus had their own way of sorrowing. They had followed Jesus up the hill of Golgatha, wailing and weeping. But after the death their inclination and training to do the practical things began to take over and helped them express their sorrow. They had realized that the preparation of the body for burial could not happen on the Sabbath, on the holy day of rest. So already on that evening when Jesus died, they began to prepare the spices and ointments that they wished to use to embalm his body, to give that earthly body its final touch of human warmth. But as was their religious duty, they resisted doing this on the Sabbath. The other story-teller Luke just says about that day, “they rested according to the commandment.” Among this group of mourners was a disciple called Mary Magdalene. We know very little about her except that she had been

healed of seven demons according to Mark's gospel and was one of the three female disciples who are named in the gospel records.

The male followers are not mentioned in the story at this point. They are hidden in the story, and perhaps also in reality. The last mention of Peter, the outspoken leader of the group of Twelve, comes on that fateful night when Jesus was judged guilty and sentenced to death. Peter's fear had gotten the better of him and he had forgotten all of the lofty promises he had made previously to Jesus. His words, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" have become a lie, as he denies that he ever knew Jesus. What has happened to the bravado of Peter, who even in the garden when Jesus was arrested struck one of the slaves of the high priest and cut off his ear? Why this sudden fear? This desperate attempt to hide from the authorities? Had he suddenly realized that the religious establishment had the power and influence to kill? Had he felt the power of darkness and evil as he listened to the accusations? Or was it seeing the weakness of the leader, the apparent unwillingness to challenge evil with force that had brought forth such uneasiness, so many questions, so much fear?

Jesus, who knew Peter's heart, had predicted this earlier at the last supper when he said, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you as wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith will not fail; and once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Peter now knows what it is like to be sifted. He knows what it is like to look at himself in the mirror and to find himself wanting. And he is left with a total loss of any sense of self-worth, thus a total sense of failure and despair. At that point it was impossible for him to remember the last part of Jesus' promise, the promise that Jesus would pray for him. Pray that his faith will not fail, even at that moment of deepest despair. The promise that Peter will turn back and find something in the depth of his heart that will carry him through those dark hours.

But at this point Peter has not yet turned back! He has wept bitterly when he remembered Jesus' words, but there is no mention of Peter being present at the cross. But now Peter has sought out his friend and fellow disciple for he can no longer be alone with his sorrow. He is with this disciple, the one called the beloved one, as this new day begins.

The beloved disciple is usually understood as being John, though the gospel writer is not clear on this. If it is John, we know that he had also fled with the rest but had returned to the cross. He was with the women around the cross and was able to hear Jesus' words of concern for his mother, Mary. For him, the task of accepting

Mary as his mother with all the responsibility that this would entail, was a real comfort. In his dying moment, Jesus had entrusted this special relationship to him, and for John this translated into a sign of Jesus' love for him. Even as Jesus died, John had been given the gift of trust and love. This gave him some comfort. But it was also this very special relationship that made the sorrow so great. And John was also the one who may have pondered and thought about Jesus' words the most. But try as he would he could not imagine anything good coming out of this death!

Surprisingly, there are some who are remembering Jesus' words. Matthew fills us in with some additional details. The chief priest and Pharisees, the religious authorities have not been able to rest even after the crucifixion. They are still worried about the power of this man. It is they who remember the words of Jesus, for they have listened very carefully to everything that he has said. Their careful listening, however, has not been for the purpose of understanding, but to find something they can use with which they can accuse Jesus. They are blinded to the truth because they begin with seeing Jesus as a fraud. After his death they come to Pilate with their request: "Sir, we remember what the imposter said while he was still alive. "After three days I will rise again. Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people 'He has been raised from the dead.'" And the last deception would be worse than the first."

How strange that the ones who remembered Jesus' words were his enemies. The ones, who saw only deception in his words! So Pilate humours these fearful men by setting a guard around the tomb. Not only will there be a large stone in front of it, but there will be a guard of soldiers.

And so the main characters in this drama are introduced. None of them are able to see beyond the cross. All of them assume that the drama will end with this feeling of despair. Everything seems dark and hopeless! No-one is counting on Jesus to enter the story again, upsetting all expectations and creating an entirely new story line that will overcome the fear, the despair, and the sadness. After all, Jesus is dead.

But a new day is beginning to dawn. It is still dark; however, the women are already on their way to the tomb. John's story picks it up at this point by focussing on three characters, Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. He totally ignores the guards around the tomb. They are no longer important to the story. For the tomb is empty and the large stone has been removed. This is the first surprise of the story. Mary sees the empty tomb and runs

to tell Peter and John. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him”. Mary jumps to conclusions that make sense to her. “Jesus is not there. Jesus had enemies during his life. Now they are carrying on that enmity even in death. These enemies have stolen the body.”

Different assumptions about Jesus lead to different conclusions. The enemies feel that the followers will steal the body. The followers feel that the enemies will steal the body. Everyone is suspicious of the other. Therefore, they cannot see the truth!

Peter and the beloved disciple begin to run to the tomb anxious to verify what Mary had told them. I wonder what thought went through their minds. Do they think, “Oh, its Mary’s fantastic imagination again! She has just failed to look deeply enough into the tomb and in her sorrow has failed to see where the body is laid?” Or do they believe her and think, “Now even the body is not there anymore.” Or do they remember Jesus’ promise that he will rise again? Are they anticipating a miracle or is this just another disappointing development in the larger tragedy of these last few days?

John tells us there was a race to the tomb and he also tells us who was faster. Why this detail? Was he trying to tell us something about the deeper feelings within each one? Was Peter more hesitant because of his guilt? Was the beloved disciple more anxious because of his great love for Jesus? Or is this just another way of saying that the responses to the clues left by Jesus are unique to each person—each interprets the events through their own lens and responds as they are able.

But the next clue that the gospel writer gives, adds another question to our musings. The disciple whom Jesus loves sees the linen wrappings but does not go into the tomb. Peter goes right into the tomb and sees the linen wrappings but also notes that the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head was rolled up in a place by itself. And that cloth was not lying haphazard but rather was neatly rolled up. What can this mean? The beloved disciple now goes in as well, and together they look at the place where Jesus had lain, unable to fathom the mystery of what could have happened. John tells us that both disciples did not understand.

I think it is at this point that we can identify most closely with the disciples. For we too find it hard to believe that Jesus in his humanness could live again, entering our 21st century lives on this Easter morning. Despite the witness of the empty tomb, we too struggle with doubt, and are deaf to the promises of Jesus that he will meet us in our daily struggles. We know that believing in the resurrection is not rationally defensible, yet the dynamic power of the Christian faith depends on this

fact.

As I mentioned in my last sermon, John's gospel has been full of signs or clues that people did not understand—signs like turning water into wine or feeding 5000 people or healing those who were sick or even those more obscure signs like those in his conversations with Nicodemus or with the woman at the well. What is important about these clues is that they point to Jesus, as one who is divine though also fully human. They point to Jesus who is truly the Messiah sent from God. The response to the signs divided the believers-- the followers of Jesus-- from others who were merely curious or even hostile.

In this story the sign of the empty tomb is followed by belief. John tells us that the beloved disciple believed. But this is followed by the words: "as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead." How puzzling. Belief coming before understanding? Or is it always that way, that we must risk belief, that is opening ourselves up to the possibility of God doing something beyond our understanding, beyond our present ability to reason it all out, before we can see the truth?

The gospel writer now turns his attention to Mary Magdalene who stands weeping at the tomb. She is overwhelmed with sorrow. The body is gone and even her ointments are useless. But as she looks into the tomb again, she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She answers, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Again, how strange! Here is another sign that something extraordinary has taken place. Angels are no ordinary beings! Did she not recognize them as angels? Was she not aware that no-one should be in the tomb-- other than the dead Jesus? Perhaps she was so overwhelmed with her own feelings of loss that she could not see the signs that pointed to God's surprising intervention in the tragic events of the week.

But the question is asked a second time: "Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" This time she supposes it is the gardener. "Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." Mary is weeping and clinging to the last remnant of the human Jesus as she has known him. She is not ready for new revelation. She wants to return to the former relationship, for she was certain that it was good.

Instead she is called by name. "Mary" And in that moment she recognizes the Rabbi, whom she has loved, her Lord. And her dearest friend. "Rabouni!"

"Teacher!" she responds. She sees the risen One and recognizes him as the same one who had healed her and whom she had followed during his lifetime on earth. The final clue, Jesus calling her by name, gives her the certainty she needs. The calling of her by name reminds her of who Jesus really is and of the reality of a relationship that neither physical death nor rational doubt can destroy.

But immediately Jesus warns, "Don't hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go tell my brothers and sisters and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God." Jesus knew that Mary wanted to hold onto him physically, but he assures her that she will be able to hold onto him in a different way. The intimacy between them is the intimacy of having a God and heavenly parent in common. They are now united spiritually through their common access to God. Jesus has become the way to be in touch with God in an intimate, deeply personal way.

For Mary that is enough. I am not sure that she understood all that Jesus said to her. But she did understand that it was Jesus whom she has seen. And she is now ready to proclaim that most important fact to the other followers. She has seen Jesus. He had called her by name. Her time of weeping is over. She had seen the risen Lord.!

Our story for today ends at this point, but the rest of the chapter continues with Jesus appearing to the other followers, coming through closed doors, addressing their particular doubts, calling them by name and speaking peace to them. The chapter ends with these words, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

And that is what we have been doing today. We have followed the drama of this first day of the week rather carefully in order that we may recognize the clues -- clues that point to the One whom God sent to give us life that has meaning and joy and peace. We have identified with the confusion, the questions and above all the sorrow and loneliness and despair that the characters feel. We have doubted with them that God can enter our world, intervening and overcoming the fear of death. We have gone with them to the tomb, and tried to interpret the clues left for us. And with the disciples we often have difficulty believing the witnesses without seeing Jesus ourselves.

But then Jesus calls us by name! Often this is only a whisper in our hearts, but we

recognize the voice. "Lydia, John, Mary, Paul!!" Whoever you are, you hear that name being called. And you know deeply within yourself that Jesus is alive today.

Today we will celebrate communion, a service rich in symbolism, symbols that are clues to us of Jesus's life, death and resurrection. As we reach out for the bread and wine we also reach out personally in faith to the One who has called each of us by name. Some of us will identify most with Peter who has been sifted and found wanting, but who still runs to the tomb in his confusion, in his regret and in his despair. Some of us will be like Mary Magdalene who stand at the tomb weeping and who in our grief and sorrow and loneliness cannot recognize Jesus until Jesus speaks our name. And some will be like the beloved disciple who does not understand but does love and in this love risks belief. All of us, wherever we are in this story, are called by name to come, to eat and drink and to celebrate the living Christ.

Easter is both a personal and a communal celebration. Our gathering on Easter morning is a concrete witness to the living Christ who has called this congregation MFM into being, who lives among us in the present and who is creating a community of love and caring and justice and peace out of a diverse collective of people, each with our own stories and our own grief and despair, and our own gifts. So on this day, we are inviting each of you to join us in our communal response to the Risen Christ.

Perhaps you have never been baptized and are wondering how to declare your own allegiance to Christ. Or you may want to ask for church membership if you would like to more fully embrace this fellowship as your church home. Any of the elders and pastors would welcome a conversation with you about that important step. But wherever you are in your own journey, we invite you to look for the clues that God is bringing about new life and vigour into that which seems dead and lifeless. And we invite you to respond as fully as you are able as you hear Jesus calling you by name.

So let us proclaim that Jesus is not dead but alive as we commune with each other, as we sing and celebrate God's victory over despair, evil and violence. Surely this day is a day of wonder and joy! Let us sing and rejoice!