

Easter Sermon: “The Kind of Son Every Mother Has Been Looking For!”

April 4, 2010: John 20:1-18

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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

“Then Simon Peter, came [into the tomb], following John . . . he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.”

It is Jesus’ grave cloths – the linen wrappings of entombment – that are the first thing to catch Peter’s eye as he enters the empty tomb that first Easter. What strikes Peter is that the cloths are not disheveled or disarrayed in a heap on the floor. The Greek phrase for, “rolled up in a place by itself” translates as, “still in their folds.” The cloths for the body and the napkin for the face used when Jesus was buried were all neatly folded up, as if they had never even been put on or taken off.

Now is this the kind of son every mother through out human history has been looking for or what! A son, who when he takes off his cloths, folds them back up and neatly places them back where he found them! A son who even in the midst of rising from the dead - the greatest miracle ever known to humanity – still takes the time to fold his cloths and neatly place them back on the bed! This guy Jesus really was perfect!

How many mothers, wives and girlfriends in the congregation are now thinking that this portion of the resurrection story will become an object lesson to use with their own men-folk the next time they try and get them to pick up and fold their own clothes? Hey buddy, if it was good enough for Jesus, its good enough for you.

But it is not sons’ or men’s personal habits that I want to discuss this Easter morning. Rather, I want to focus on one particular woman - Mary Magdalene - and one daughter - Sidney Lynn - who is to be baptized in a few minutes.

Mary Magdalene is the first person to discover the empty tomb that first Easter and she is the first to see the risen Christ. In today’s Gospel, after Peter and John depart the empty tomb, Mary stands weeping outside it. Peering inside she sees two angels and in her grief at not finding the body of Jesus she implores his whereabouts of them. “They have taken away my Lord,” she says, “and I do not where they have laid him.”

Mary assumes that the body has been stolen by his adversaries or grave robbers. Neither, by the way, would have been such neat-nicks as to have neatly re-folded those grave cloths. Mary then turns around and sees a man (not too clearly, remember she is crying) whom she does not recognize as Jesus. Thinking him to be a gardener, she implores him just as she implored the angels, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

A few moments later, Jesus utters her name, Mary. The text tells us that after hearing her name said, she again turns toward Jesus and exclaims in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” which means Rabbi, teacher.

So according to the text, Mary turns twice, and *both times it is toward Jesus*. So using CSI skills, this tells us that Mary actually had to turn one more time in between the recorded turnings, and that time had to be to turn back toward the grave. After initially turning toward who she believed was the gardener, she is then drawn to turn once more toward the grave, the empty tomb; the tomb which represents death, darkness, the past.

Mary did not recognize the risen Jesus because she morbidly insisted in facing the wrong direction. She could not take her eyes off the grave and so she had her back to Jesus which made him unrecognizable.

How often is that the case for us? How often in life are we morbidly, even pathologically, drawn toward the tombs of our life's journey; tombs, both large and small? It is a difficult thing for us to acknowledge this aspect of our human nature. Yet we, like Mary, can allow ourselves to become so obsessed with death, loss, despair, the negative, the bad and the wreckage of our past that we fail to see the Lord of Life who is standing there right behind us.

The Church has recognized our human tendency to focus on death and the grave in all of its manifestations. The Church, through liturgy and sacraments, has always countered that tendency by keeping our eyes focused on the new life that the risen Christ offers us . . . all the time.

We are baptizing Sydney Lynn this morning into the household of God: the Church. In the liturgy I will be asking six questions of Sydney's parents and godparents. Three of those questions are renunciations of the spiritual forces of wickedness and the evil powers of this world and three are affirmations of Jesus Christ as Savior.

In the early days of the Church, candidates for baptism would stand facing west for the three renunciations. It is in the west that the sun sets each day and darkness comes. The west symbolically represents death, darkness, negativity, and the past. The candidates would then be required to pivot 180 degrees and face the east. Of course it is in the east that the sun rises each day; the east represents light, hope, the positive, unlimited possibilities and most of all new life. These six questions and their corresponding turning movement are a powerful symbol and reminder of Mary Magdalene's eventually turning from the death and darkness of the grave toward the light of new life: from the empty tomb to the risen Christ.

Of course turning to the new life imbued in this beautiful new baby, Sidney Lynn, is easy. Her innocence compels us to turn, if for at least a moment, toward new life and all of its possibilities. But turning is not always such an easy or agreeable task. The grip of the grave and the ways of darkness and death are powerful ones. Plus we can even find them attractive, mesmerizing, addictive and even enjoyable!

Think of the ways death and darkness have vice-gripped your own life:

- Do you persist in looking for some small fault in every experience you have, no matter how wonderful it is?
- Are you quick to criticize someone and slow to praise, if you praise at all?
- Are you infected with what I call the Cleveland malaise; the dwelling on the gloomy possibilities of each idea and project proposed to bring hope to this beleaguered city, and always predicting its ultimate failure, because after all, *this is Cleveland*?
- Are you obsessed with dwelling on someone's small foibles, someone who otherwise has an abundance of positive gifts to offer you and the world? Do you find satisfaction in doing this? Do you feel better about yourself or weirdly self-righteous afterwards?
- Do you find comfort during your troubled times by engaging in the addictive behaviors of alcohol, excessive consumerism, gossip, character assassination, drugs, being mesmerized by screens both large and small?

These are but a few ways that death and darkness grip our lives preventing us from turning toward light and new life. I'm sure you can identify others.

We see the very grip of darkness at work when Mary looks and fails to recognize the risen Jesus. It is critical to note that at this point that Jesus could have just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Forget this. Let me go see if someone else I hung out with will know who I am." Jesus has just got to get exasperated with our addiction to death, darkness and the negative at times.

But of course that is not who Jesus is. Jesus' entire life and ministry were about loosening us from the forces of death's grip and showing us new life. *Jesus is the one who chose every means possible to do this by sharing the new way of life God was and is*

always bringing about.

- By loving the disenfranchised, the outcast, the unclean, the least lovable and those who dwell in darkness in the world, Jesus showed God's new way of life.
- By referring to God by the affectionate and intimate term Abba - Daddy - and not lord and master, Jesus showed God's new way of life.
- By forgiving sins and vindicating love, Jesus showed God's new way of life.
- By speaking truth to the power of the corrupt social system and callous hierarchies of both church and state, Jesus showed God's new way of life.
- By his rising from the grave and overcoming death itself, Jesus showed God's new way of life.

The Resurrection is the ultimate act of Jesus Christ showing us God's new way of life.

- It is the thunderous call of God to turn from the darkness of the empty tombs of our lives.
- It is the seismic earthquake that awakens us from the grip of our morbid stupor with darkness and death.
- It is that beyond compare moment when we hear our names being intimately uttered by the one who knows our every fiber.
- It is the mighty imprimatur (im-pre-MA-tour) of God on our lives, *proclaiming that Jesus is the light, that the way of Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.*

Death and the tomb seemed to Mary Magdalene to be the end but they were not. Death, fear, despair and misery are never the last word. Raising Jesus is God's ultimate testimony to the world that the worst thing that can ever happen is not the last thing. New life in the light of Christ is always the last thing.

Do you want that new life? It is yours to be had! Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling your name. Now you do have *to want* to turn away from the tomb, repelling death's grip on you. But if you do, Jesus will be standing there, I promise. Well, actually its God's promise, not mine. But Jesus will be there with new life in him, for you.

Imagine that? New life . . . new life . . . new life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.