

Psalm 118: 14-24  
John 20: 1-18

“Getting to Easter”

R.P.C.  
April 20, 2014

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I’m wondering how you have come here this morning.... No, I’m not wondering about your mode of transportation – I assume 98% of you arrived by car. Rather I’m wondering about the motivational aspect of your presence – what “urge” brought you here this morning?

In my pastoral experience, church attendance is always greater on Easter, so that means there may well be a greater diversity in motivation than usual in the congregation today. I expect that some of you have come here today because you are always here in worship - even when it is not Easter. Others of you may have come because, though you often or occasionally attend on Sunday’s, it’s Easter – and you know you are supposed to be here. Still others of you have likely come because someone invited you ... or someone made you attend (Mom) ... or you simply came out of curiosity.

Now don’t get paranoid, but I was kind of watching you as you arrived this morning and I noticed that, though you came by car or lumbered up the sidewalks, none of you, with the exception of a few candy-fueled children, came running. None of you ran toward Easter... which preacher and writer Tom Long notes, is quite curious, because according to John’s Easter Gospel, there was a great deal of dashing about on the first Easter morning: First, according to John, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the day, while it was still dark, and seeing the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, started running. It was not because she believed in the resurrection at that point – that would come later. Rather now, in the predawn darkness, she just begins running back to tell the rest of the disciples that Jesus’ body is gone.

While on her sprint back to town, she meets Peter and the “beloved” disciple (no one is quite sure as to who this ‘beloved disciple is, to which John is referring – though it may be a veiled reference to himself.) “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him,” Mary reports to them. John then tells us “Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.” “The two of them were running together....”

We can all sense the tempo is quite high in this part of John’s Gospel; there is a lot of running going on. Mary Magdalene in her fright, shock and grief, ran. Jesus had been crucified, was dead and buried – she had seen all that with her own eyes. But now it looks like someone has taken his body. So she ran....

On her way she meets two disciples. When she tells them what she saw – *or rather what she didn't see* - they break into a run.... She runs FROM the empty tomb; they ran TOWARD the empty tomb. I'll tell you - it's getting pretty tiring just watching all of this running that is taking place....

But did you too notice that interesting detail mentioned by John's account? John says that while these two disciples initially ran together toward the tomb suddenly the "other disciple" outran Peter. O, so now the pace has picked up even more until there is an outright footrace to get to the tomb. What? Have these disciples suddenly become competitors - rivals, or was Peter just too slow? It is Peter who is supposed to be the leader of the disciples – the one who always seems to have a ready word for most occasions. Yet when the "other disciple" gets to the tomb, he peers in at the linen wrapping, and then waits on Peter before entering. That's curious - Was he waiting out of respect for Peter, or was he simply afraid to enter first?

Notice, there are two directions of running presented here: running away from the tomb and running toward the tomb. Mary kind of reminds me of that boy I remember from way back in my high school chemistry class: During some experiment gone wrong, there was a minor explosion at the back of our classroom. Nothing serious happened, mind you, but there was a loud bang. A boy seated close to the front bolted out the door and ran down the hall and was not heard from again the rest of that day.

"What on earth were you thinking about?" the teacher asked him the next day. "I wasn't thinking about anything," he said. "I heard a loud bang; I didn't know what to do, so I ran. I was just running.... Running away."

The context of school life has changed rather dramatically since that incident some 40-plus years ago. Now if there is loud bang, students are not allowed to run even if they want to. They cannot run lest they mistakenly run not from, but toward danger, and are rather told to hide under desks as doors are locked. When the parents are told of the incident, which occurs almost immediately thanks to cell phones, they run – they run toward the school. Why run toward potential danger? If it is not your child who could be in danger, then another mother's child might be hurt. So it is that we run toward both good news, and toward news that could potentially be bad. Why? Because we must know -and know quickly - to see if the news will impact us.

A group of kids are walking down the street side-by-side. Someone shouts from down the block, "There is free ice cream being given out down at the corner

store!” Just watch them become competitors - rivals in a race to arrive first. They want to see if the good news is true, if this is to be good news for them.

As the two disciples ran that day, surely there was something in them that told them that, in this strange event that Mary had reported to them, they were running toward some strange, new, possibly terrifying future. Someone says to us, “Come! Look at this!” and we come; if we are able, we run – run toward what we do not exactly know. But we run...

Perhaps that describes for us this Sunday called Easter. We have come here, but when asked, “Why have you come here?” we may have no ready answer. Perhaps we don’t honestly know why we have come here – we have never before even considered it. We have no clear picture or expectation as to what we will think or experience.

I think John says that these two sprinting disciples came to Jesus’ tomb just like that – in that kind of state. They were unknowing – both figuratively and literally ‘in the dark’ - running toward some strange, new event which they instinctively knew meant a change in their world. John tells us that the beloved disciple outran Peter and won the race – he got there first. That may seem like a small detail, but John is careful to mention it. Not only that, but John says that he was the first one to peer into the empty tomb and believe. So the beloved disciple was the first one to believe in Easter – to believe in the promised Resurrection.

Could it be that John not only wanted to tell us that the beloved disciple got there first, but also the WAY he got there? Others came to Easter in different ways. Mary will not believe until she later stands face-to-face with the risen Christ, sees him, and hears him call her name, “Mary” in the voice she recognizes as his. Later, Thomas doesn’t believe in the risen Christ until Jesus offers to let Thomas touch his pierced hands and wounded side. So some require seeing to believe; some require hearing to believe; but some have to touch to believe.

But the beloved disciple comes to Easter another way. He believes without seeing the risen Christ. He doesn’t hear Jesus call his name. All he does is peer into the dark, empty tomb, and he believes.

As Tom Long puts it, “the beloved disciple, unlike the others, believes in the resurrection in the light of Jesus’ ABSENCE.” There is nothing there, other than abandoned grave clothes. There is no Shroud of Turin, no photos, no ‘selfie at the tomb’ – just an empty place. But, “He saw and believed.” (Jn 20:8)

Now can we see why John went to all the trouble of telling us about the running and the footrace? The very first believer in the resurrection – the first to believe in the triumph of God over death – the first to realize and celebrate that victory –

came there by the same path that you and I do by not seeing the physical appearance of the risen Christ.

Looking out at all of you, I suspect that the risen Christ has not personally appeared to you in a garden and called you by name as he did to Mary. I further suspect that no one here has touched his wounded hand and his side and believed. We have rather come here to affirm our belief on the basis of the words, "He is not here." And if we have come here with that motivation, then we too can be counted among those who are known as "beloved disciples. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe," says Jesus. That probably includes all of us here – And yet we have come because we believe.....

"O, how I wish I could have been there on that first Easter," he told me. "Wouldn't it have been great to have seen it all for yourself as an eyewitness?" As wonderful as that expression might be, it also assumes that the resurrection is some 2000 years in the past; that, if we could somehow run to the empty tomb ourselves to see, then belief would be so much easier.

Yet, such a view denies the way in which the gospels related the first Easter. Was it any easier for those who were eyewitnesses? Not really... They saw an empty tomb – but what did that mean? It might just as well have meant that someone had stolen the body, as Mary initially assumed.

The gospels honestly report the first Easter as an occasion for fear, disbelief, and astonishment. There was joy, but the joy comes after the more understandable emotions of disbelief and incomprehension ... Easter is like that. What we have here is not so much a problem of history – that gap between our time and the time of the first Easter. What we have here is a problem of faith – not faith as blind belief in something, but faith as the ability to TRUST even that which we do not have the equipment to comprehend: faith in God's ability to work life from death.

How did the beloved disciple come to faith in Easter on that first Easter? TRUST! The beloved disciple knew his beloved Jesus. Thus when he saw the empty tomb he did not think of abandonment, defeat and death. He thought of freedom, victory and life – just as his Lord had promised. At that moment he sensed that Jesus had taken their relationship to a new, and more wonderful level.

Childhood psychologist Erik Erickson wrote that a child develops trust in the first six months of life. The infant learns that, when it cries out, momentarily a voice will be heard saying, "There, there, what's wrong?" or a loving face will

appear. The infant learns thereby that parents care; they learn that the world is a trustworthy place.

Eventually, the infant will tolerate longer absences of the parent. The infant does not need the parent to be physically present every moment of the day. The parent does not have to be clearly in sight, because the young child has learned that, even though the parent is not right there in view, the parent is nearby; the parent will come when called.... We call that TRUST.

The beloved disciple did not have “proof,” as we call something proof. He had no legal certification of the resurrection. He had no concrete scientific evidence. Yet he had his relationship with Jesus, and the promise of his Lord that His resurrection would happen. In short the beloved disciple trusted and believed.

The fact that you have come here today, means that you have trusted and believed too. ‘Blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe.’ Blessed are those who run to the tomb with joy and proclaim, “Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed.” Amen.