

Sunday Sermon
April 16, 2017
“If You Must Bury Something”
John 20:1-18

Introduction

One of the most difficult times, many people say, after losing someone you love, comes after the burial. Friends and family depart, getting on with the business of their lives, and leaving you casseroles, flowers, and cards. And then the house gets very quiet, and everything there seems to remind you of the one you lost. There is his chair, his favorite television show. There are her clothes with her smell, her papers with her handwriting. It hurts so much.

In the quietness of the early morning, Mary Magdalene made her way to the cemetery where they had buried Jesus. There had not been time on Friday for a decent burial. So now, while the city was beginning to empty out from the Passover Feast, she would do the honorable thing. She would prepare the body of her friend and teacher for a proper burial. Perhaps it would ease her pain.

But there was no body. To her surprise, the stone over the tomb was rolled back, and the tomb was empty. Then Peter and another disciple arrived; and in the dimness of the early morning, they stepped inside. They saw the wrappings that had been on Jesus' body and the cloth that had been on his head. That was it. That was all there was to see.

And John says they believed. Believed what? Not that Jesus was risen from the dead. Nobody believed that. That was not logical, not natural. No, they believed that Jesus was dead and that his body had been stolen.

Then Peter and the other disciple went home. They came; they saw; they went home. It was all they could do. But Mary stayed.

I

Many counselors who study bereavement and loss say that one of the most important moments in the grief process is viewing the body, that moment when the bereaved look at the body of their loved one and know: He or she is dead; but I am still here.

My mother-in-law died one year the week after Easter. It was very sudden and unexpected. My husband had talked with her by phone just hours before. We were out of town, almost to Pennsylvania where our son was in college. It took us the better part of two days to get back to South Carolina. As we worked our way back over hundreds of miles, my husband kept saying, “I just have to see her. I have to see her body to believe she is really dead.”

Mary needed that. But there was no body. So she stood by the empty tomb crying. She wept at this final outrage. What have they done with his body? You see, the body is a big part of our love. We do not love disembodied persons. We love and remember persons in their bodies.

We went to see my mother-in-law's body at the funeral home so that one last time we could touch her soft skin and see her smile. So we could hold those hands snarled from arthritis, hands that had made candy, painted ceramics, held grandchildren, written loving notes to us.

II

The rolled stone, the linen cloths lying there, the absence of the body—these things did not move Mary to thoughts of resurrection. No, like Peter and the other disciple, she knew of only one possibility: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary wanted to find the body, say her good-byes, and get on with her grief. Only then could she get on with her life. So there she stood, confused in her grief saying, “I do not know where to find my Lord.” Have you been there? Overwhelmed, in a moment of grief, not knowing what to do or feel, thinking, “I do not know where to find my Lord.”

Mary heard a voice, “Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” But Mary was confused, her vision was blurred with tears, and she thought it was the gardener. Grasping him, she pleaded, “Tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.” Give me his body so I can give it a proper burial. And then the voice of Jesus called out her name. Like a voice shattering glass, it shattered her thinking and shocked her to the realization of a new reality. There is no body to bury. He is risen.

And she ran to tell the others, “I have seen the Lord!”

III

Our children in Junior Choir have led us through Lent this year. They packed away our alleluias for Lent, and then they brought them back into worship today. They led us in hosannas to begin Holy Week. And then so profoundly, they led us in the service on Thursday night. Standing in the aisle in the dark, as the words to Psalm 22 were chanted, they sang over and over, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Robert Smith, Director of Music, was concerned that singing those words would be disturbing for the children. So he took special care to say to the children, “You are singing these words because Jesus used them. And Jesus used those words so you can know that if you ever feel like saying that you can know Jesus is with you.”

You have come today, like Mary, to find Jesus, to pay your respects, to do the conventional, honorable, proper thing and then get on with the business of your life.

Only you do not find Jesus in the way you expect. You stand in confusion, thinking you do not know where to look. You feel like someone has stolen him from your life.

Then Jesus calls out your name and shatters your expectations, your assumptions about life and death. And you realize: You do not find Jesus; Jesus finds you.

Conclusion

Like Mary, we do not have a body to bury this morning. Jesus is alive. He is risen.

So if you must bury something this morning:

Let it be your confusion, your doubts and your fears.

Let it be your false assumptions and expectations.

Let it be your hopelessness.

Because death has given way to victory.

And you have the assurance that whatever tomorrow brings, the living Lord is with you. And you do not ever have to say, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

So I am going to say those words to you one more time this morning, the words of the ancient Easter Acclamation of the church, the affirmation of believers through the ages.

I am going to say, "The Lord is risen." And when you respond, "He is risen indeed!" this time I want you to say those words like you believe them and you celebrate them down in the very depths of your soul.

So I say to you on Easter of 2017, "The Lord is risen!"

And you respond: "**He is risen indeed!**"

Hallelujah!