

Sermon: Easter Day: 16 April 2017

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

*Supposing him to be the gardener, [Mary] said to him, “sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away” (John 20.17a).*

What a beautifully human scene John gives us of three grieving disciples, each holding onto their love of Jesus, each barely daring to hope that something good could still come from the tragedy that befell them all, just days ago. Even when they begin to see evidence that something miraculous has indeed happened, they're not sure what to make of it.

John tells us that the disciples, until now, “did not understand” that Christ must rise from the dead (20.9). Even now, they seem to be having a hard time processing what's going on and what these events mean. As we know from our observance of Holy Week and Lent, Christ has been focused for some time now on preparing them for all this. On Thursday, we heard him say, “you do not know now what I am doing, but later, you will understand” (13.7). Today is the dawn of that later understanding, but it will still take time for it to sink in – oh, some 2000 odd years and counting.

But the disciples begin to work it out. And we continue to work it out. And the foundation for this understanding-in-progress is the message that the risen Christ gives to Mary to pass along: “Do not hold onto me... ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (20.17). It is not enough that Christ comes back to life. If it were, we could have celebrated Easter two weeks ago, when Lazarus was raised. Christ is raised not only from the tomb, but all the way to the heart of God, to reunite humanity with the God from whom we came.

Christ is risen! On Friday, Christ was raised up high on the cross. Today, he is raised not just from the tomb, but all the way to heaven. Our church calendar, in

accordance with the synoptic Gospel tradition, has us celebrate Christ's ascension forty days from now. But John's Gospel tells it differently. In John's Gospel, Christ's ascension to the Father happens now, when Mary lets go. And it is because Christ goes to the Father that the disciples are inspired and empowered to take up his life and work now.

When the disciples race to the tomb to try and track down the body of Jesus, when Mary clings to the resurrected Christ, they are reaching out in grief for a man they have known and loved, hoping beyond hope to recapture the life they had known in him. But resurrection does not mean a return to the old life, no matter how good that life was. Resurrection means that everything is made new, everything is transformed. Christ must ascend to God the Father, to inaugurate a new creation, where true life is restored, where death has no say, where perfect peace and justice and love are realized. That new creation beckons us forward, declaring to us the real possibility of a new and different way.

All too often, we in the church, like those first disciples, cling to the past, to the man Jesus, who we hope will be our personal saviour and companion. But the resurrected Christ insists that we must let him go. Although he loves us more dearly than we can fathom, he will not submit to our controlling embrace any more than he would be tamed by the power of earthly authorities. We must let him go. When we let him go, not only will he ascend to the new creation, he will also lead us there.

When Christ burst the bonds of death, he also opened the way to the new creation. Now, the new creation is not only a place where we may follow someday; it is a reality that even now spills over into this world. And we are called to be witnesses and ministers of this new creation here and now.

Often, we in the church focus on what Christ can do for us rather than on what Christ can do through us. But the risen Christ urges us to let go of him so that he

may ascend to the Father and, in so doing, lift us from the self-absorbed quest for personal salvation to the glory of the self-giving love of God's new creation. Of course, it's not that Christ's earthly life doesn't matter after the resurrection. On the contrary, that life is the pattern for the new life of the resurrection. The difference is that, after the resurrection, that pattern is for all Christ's people. Rather than looking to a single, remarkable individual to perform all the life-giving work our world needs, we are ourselves to live out that life: to raise up the downcast, to welcome the outcast, to love without measure and to believe in and stand up for all that is good, fearless of evil, because Christ's resurrection makes clear that evil itself is doomed.

Do we, like the disciples, live in that early, post-resurrection haze, not understanding that Christ must both rise from the dead and ascend to the Father? Do we get stuck in thinking that Christ is confined to that crucified body that awoke from the tomb? Today, we come to the sacrament that reminds us that Christ's risen body extends far beyond the physical form to which Mary clings. Christ's body has itself become food for us, that we might become what we receive: the risen, ascended, glorified body of Christ that brings God's transforming life to our world.

Alleluia! Amen