

Sermon Archive 289

Sunday 12 April, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: John 20: 1-18
John 20: 19-23

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Choosing a theme for Good Friday's service, this year, it was a no-brainer. Our country had gone into lockdown, and our Knox community had been suspended from gathering. We did our best, and continue to, to keep people in touch, but "isolation" had to be the theme. Isolation was an easy frame through which to look at the crucifixion story: by an act of judgment, Jesus is pushed out of his community. He's thrown up there onto a hill, where it's made final that people don't want him in the world - although some people within the world did, and do want him. But the story fits well with the theme of "social isolation".

So today, as we read the next bit of the story of God, of Jesus and people, what might be an answer to that? We've heard two readings - weird and wonderful, strange but disturbingly playful with our hope.

So we look at them now, looking for what the risen One does when he lives again in this world to which we belong.

-ooOoo-

The first thing the risen One does is to not be found where we expected to find him. In the garden there should be a tomb, and yes, there's a tomb. But is it really a tomb if there's no body in it? If there's no body, then maybe it's just a space - a suitably crafted thing with no purpose. We could go mad here, working out what an empty tomb is, but that's a distraction. The point is that where we expected death, we find none. And it plays with our heads, and makes no sense. O yes, we'll come up

with our theories - someone's been in and removed him. That's what **Mary** assumes, and I guess it makes better sense than suspecting a miracle - although he'd done things before that we didn't understand, that we consigned to the happening of a miracle. But when he did those, he was **alive**. So this doesn't seem a likely thing - as if miracles are likely things! But, as the resurrection story-teller tells his tale, we'll just let that be. But the first thing the Lord of Resurrection does, is present us with something we don't understand. The first result of what Jesus does, or has had done to him, is that people begin to wonder. What was our Lenten theme? ("I don't know! Do you know? God knows."). As the community moves on from the numbness, to beginning again to wonder, is that a first engagement - a coming together?

The next thing. Mary is keenly aware of this huge gap in her life - where someone special used to be. What do you do with that? She goes to visit the grave - getting caught up in the mystery of its emptiness. She invites people she's known to take a look, and tell her what to think. They come and look. They see the absence, but no word of what they said to her is recorded. Is that because they had nothing to say? Did her sorrow frighten them? Or did they truly also not know what to do with mystery - where's that body gone? Peter and the other disciple go away. So she's in the garden alone. Turning around she sees the gardener, but not the gardener, who breaks her lack of recognition by speaking her name. Ah, the name - that word that reveals to us that we are known. (She wants to hug him, but can't. She wants to keep him, but can't. But he's with her.) The presence of the absent; the coming again of the chased away; the word spoken after three days of silence. If Friday's about the great isolation, Sunday morning in the garden (which doesn't make sense) is when once again she's addressed by the Word. Is this engagement? Is this a coming together again?

Now Mary is scuttling home. I use the word "scuttle" not because she's a crab - although the same society that called Jesus "worthless" probably considers her to be crab-like. (Some things never change, not

even after a miracle!). I say she's scuttling, because it describes someone whom I imagine was in a dither. She's clearly heard him say "Go to my brothers". Maybe she'd wanted to stay there in the garden - beholding, enjoying, the mystery. But the mystery's told her to go. But the last time she saw the brothers, they had nothing to say. They came, looked, said nothing and went. What's she going to say this time? How's she going to put it? I don't know. Do you know? Sure as hell, she doesn't know. But something in her encounter with the risen One convinces that she needs to get back to the brothers, with her startling conviction - an affirmation of life, confession of resurrection, news that the isolation hasn't worked! Of course, in going back to the brothers, she's back among the people given to her by Jesus. He made of them a family - a belonging. And now she's going back, probably without thinking greatly, to reclaim her place among those who scattered. Once she knocks on the door, and goes inside, will that be a restoration of community? A pushing back of the isolation that followed the isolation, that followed the isolation? Is resurrection breaking the victory of isolation?

She arrives, and she tells them. We don't know how they respond - although in Luke's gospel, Luke tells us that they thought it was buncombe. Here, in John's version, no word about that. The major word in John is that she found them not out and about, but hidden at home - with the doors locked, because they were frightened. (Isolation - locked doors - my doors are locked - not because I'm frightened, though, or am I?) They're frightened, and they unlock the door, open the door just enough to let a good-news woman enter in. And then we are told they all saw Jesus. He was with them. He was wishing them "peace". What do we say of this risen One? Do we say that he comes into the locked away places where we're isolated in fear - and speaks to us of peace, and wishes us peace, and then actually gives us peace? Well, I would think, if that's one of the fruits of resurrection, then for us, particularly at our time of locked doors,

that *is* a miracle of God. Happy Easter, everyone; isolation has been overthrown . . .

But, in this preposterous story, there is one more thing. He then tells ***them all*** to go out again into their world with a message of forgiveness. What is forgiveness? It's the restoring of relationships that have been broken by sin - and what's sin? The killing of an innocent; the telling of lies at his trial; the refusal to listen to the voice of love! They're told to go out into the world of all that, and speak again, forgive, restore. How's that for isolation? Isolation's ***dead*** - Christ is ***alive***. Good Friday finds its answer.

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There you go. That's the Easter sermon. From the dawning of the resurrection, people's encounters with the risen One moved them by degrees into further (maybe deeper) engagement with those who'd suffered from the brokenness of the world. He who came to be with the world now has an Easter-convicted people who will do the same. Will they do it with the same love and confidence that he did? For the last time I say "I don't know". Probably you don't know. But God knows! He is risen. He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God.

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