

“Whom do you seek?”

Job 19:23-27

John 20:1-18

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?’”

On Easter Sunday morning when, once again, the church’s implausible claim is said and sung and shouted throughout the world—that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!—we begin not with a claim but, as we have for the last six weeks and as is our want in this community, with a question. In particular, this morning, we have to do with Jesus’ tender question of Mary Magdalene in John’s Gospel which is his question of each one who has wandered through the sanctuary door of a church this morning: Whom do you seek?

Notice he asks not “what” do you seek but “whom”. The question presumes you are looking this morning not for something but someone; presumes there is an absence in your life you would end if you could or someone missing whom you would bring back if such things were possible. Perhaps someone who was your heart has died or left or changed so as to be unrecognizable. Or maybe you are the one who has done the leaving, the changing, the dying and you are lost to yourself. Though to tell the truth, in a world where “God is, of all missing persons, the most missed,” it just may be that God’s absence, like an empty tomb, has sent you running with Peter and John to the place and to the people who once passed faith along. And the fact that you are seeking at all instead of being resigned to the brute enigma of an ending further suggests you harbor a hope, however faint, and may even employ the future tense, now and again, to assert a wild expectation that your seeking will end in a meeting. Not by chance, the story before us has to do with just such a meeting!

On that first Easter morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb seeking what remained of her friend. And what remained, she thought, was a dead body. As the

absence in our lives has to do with looking death in the face, each of us has done the same. Every morning on my way to the church, I drive past a vast cemetery where often a lone figure stands motionless before a gravestone. A spouse, a parent, a child, a friend is dead and all that is left on earth is a name chiseled in stone and the memories that will one day be buried and gone with the mourner as he goes down to the grave.

I happen to know that for some of you here this morning, that is enough. Death is a destiny that does not disturb you. Mortal life, however brief or difficult, *is* what it is. A good number of you have said as much. If I try to imagine your answer to Jesus' question--Whom do you seek?--I imagine you might say that you are here because you seek in him the example of a life well-lived. Just so, Jesus' words and deeds, his ethics and his actions are helpful, perhaps even central to the way you try and live your life. He is, however, as dead to you as your dear Uncle Bill whom you remember fondly if at all after these many years. Like the "comfortable minds" of e. e. cummings' Cambridge ladies who "believe in Longfellow and Jesus, both dead," this is certainly a reasonable way to do your living and your dying: live enriched by remembering and die with no hope or need for a future meeting. It is, by your report, enough.

No doubt this was all that Mary Magdalene expected to have at the end of the morning: her memories. Legend was that she lived her life loosely until she met Jesus, whom she followed and even loved. But then he was murdered and now, on the third day since his death, as was the custom, and while it is still dark (never an idle detail in John's Gospel), she goes to his tomb to mourn. The rest would almost have been history except, to her utter surprise and horror, the gravestone had been moved and the body was missing. "They took the Lord from the tomb," Mary says to Simon Peter, "and we do not know where they have put him." It was a reasonable assumption given the facts, especially in a time when tomb robbery was so prevalent that there

was an imperial edict against it.

In response to Mary's report, Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple set out to see for themselves. Perhaps, by now, the light has begun to dawn, for they go into the tomb only to find the wrappings and the cloth that covered Jesus' head neatly folded. A grave-robber who was a bit obsessive-compulsive, perhaps! But of the beloved disciple John writes, "He saw and believed," adding in parentheses that neither disciple yet understood the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. So if he did not yet understand the resurrection, what exactly did he believe?

Some of us who do find death disturbing can manage one further step on Easter morning. Because the tomb was empty, we try to believe as best we can *that* Jesus was raised. This is not belief according to John's Gospel—not active commitment--but belief as an internal disposition. Believing in this way, drawing a different set of conclusions from the report of an empty tomb, we seek a "what" rather than a "whom." With the body out of the way, we are freed from the particularity of the incarnation and permitted to imagine what we will about whatever it is in us or in those we love that lives on after death. I will never forget my religion professor's daughter telling me on an Easter morning almost forty years ago that Easter was when Jesus died and came back as a ghost to haunt you for the rest of your life. Better yet is the *idea* of immortality, of never-ending-ness that makes of death an inconsequential morphing from one realm of being into the next. Especially if death is not a destination you relish, then the whole idea of an immortal, disembodied, indeterminate soul almost manages still to skate on the thin ice of reason. Though it is also the sort of believing that finally does not require a community or even a narrative. You can simply "fill in the blank" that is the fact of an empty tomb or a fresh grave with whatever helps you get through the next turn in the road until all your turns are over. This would be the "spiritual but not religious" option. Whom do you seek?: a dead but not entirely

gone friend or spouse or child; a dead but not entirely gone faith, a dead but not entirely gone Jesus.

As the story continues, Mary Magdalene, for her part, continues to stick to plausible facts she can grasp. Jesus is dead; his body is missing. She is now looking, through her tears, for whoever it was who took the body. Even the appearance of two angels marking the empty space in the tomb (like the cherubim that once guarded the Ark of the Covenant, God's dwelling place on earth) does not cause her to doubt death's dominion. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. "Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Cognitive dissonance and angels aside, there was nothing in Mary's mind, no place in her imagination, no crack in human reason that could have prepared her for the meeting that was about to take place.

Still in the midst of this conversation, her eye catches sight of a stranger and she turns to face him. Maybe he is the thief or is someone who can tell her what she needs to know. The stranger not only asks why she is weeping but asks, as he had asked the angry crowd a few nights before on the Mount of Olives, "Whom do you seek?" In both cases, those asked have only death on their minds. Thinking the man to be a gardener, she repeats the facts as she knows them, but only one detail is worthy of notice: even though Jesus is alive and standing in front of her, nothing will change in Mary's understanding until Jesus, in freedom, chooses to "show himself". The same was so on the road to Emmaus and at table in the upper room and here with us this morning. The word is *orphthe* and is used throughout Scripture in relation God's glory, God's living presence that "shows itself" and is apprehended by human beings who, in response, are terrified or doubt or are astonished or run or simply rejoice.

That is to say, God has left the Risen Lord free to surprise us at any time and in any guise

he chooses even as we are left free to react as we will. So while John lets us in on the truth—that Jesus is not dead but alive—we might as well be looking at a gardener for all that we are able to grasp of the news. Perhaps we receive it as information because, back to the empty tomb, we think the resurrection is an idea to entertain rather than an encounter with the love that death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison; or perhaps the God who raised Jesus has not yet chosen to show himself to us.

But now on that first Easter morning, something extraordinary happens. “Mary,” he says to her. He calls her name. In response Mary immediately takes hold of Jesus, exclaiming, “Rabboni!” In that split second of revelation and response, everything knowable about life and its meaning is given a new beginning and a new ending in the love that has no beginning and no end. But merely human words can contain this truth: only the living presence of the Crucified. Because he lives, love and not death is Mary’s destiny and our destiny and the destiny of the absent and the missing for whom our hearts long and with whom, in the love that is God, we will be reunited. Because he lives, death no longer has dominion and we may be fearless in the face of all in this life who claim to hold the power of death, making of believers fearless witnesses in the city and the nation and in the world to the love that left death behind.

Whom do you seek? Like Mary, you and I can only be completely taken by surprise at “the gift of a meeting in which we are free to hear the word of [love] which God has spoken in Jesus Christ [and hear] in such a way that in spite of all that contradicts it [in spite of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword, to name a few], we may once for all, exclusively and entirely, hold to His promise and guidance.” Another name for the gift of that meeting is faith.

For the rest of the story, you will have to come back next Sunday. Seriously! Every

Sunday, said John Calvin, is Easter Sunday. Because the gift of meeting that was given on that first Easter morning is the same gift of meeting in which you may become free to hear, week in and week out, the word of grace spoken by God in Jesus Christ that is embodied at this font, addressed to us in Scripture, proclaimed from this pulpit, acted out around the table in the breaking of bread and dared as Christ's living presence in the church bears witness in the world to death's defeat and love's victory.

Whom do you seek? "Let us not mock God with metaphor,/analogy, sidestepping transcendence;/making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the/faded credulity of earlier ages," wrote John Updike, "let us walk through the door" and into the world as those who live by the fact that the first and final Word of God is Yes and that Jesus lives. "He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.