

“Not the Final Word” John 20:1-18 Easter, 2020

On the Saturday evening before Easter, a young mom was trying to distract her hungry four year-old son, Scott, while she got dinner on the table. She decided to talk to him about the importance of Good Friday and Easter, telling him that because of what Jesus went through, we can all go to heaven.

Scott thought for a moment and then asked, “When will we come back from heaven?”

“We won’t need to come back. We’ll live there forever!” his mother replied.

Suddenly Scott’s expression turned to panic as he shrieked, “Then how are we going to eat dinner?”

I’m right with you, Scott! Most of the time I’m more concerned about the here and now, real-world aspects of my life, than about future theological hopes! So I’m going to try to bring the Easter message right down to where we live this morning!

Before I read the Easter story from John’s gospel, it’s important to remember the context. Jesus’ disciples had devoted several years to following him around the country, listening to his teaching and watching his miracles. They believed that he was God’s Son, the Messiah, and had

hoped that he would bring liberation to the Jewish people, who were under cruel Roman oppression. Then Thursday and Friday came. Jesus was betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, subjected to a sham trial, cruelly whipped, nailed to a cross and left to die. They saw the spear go in his side and the professional executioners declare him dead, before a large round stone was rolled across the tomb entrance where he had been placed. They were stunned, feeling confused, and ashamed for abandoning their dear friend when he needed them most. And, they felt powerless against the forces of evil that they had encountered. Their grief bordered on despair as they hid behind closed doors. Then Sunday morning came, bringing an event that would literally change the course of human history. I'm reading from John 20.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He

saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. (John 20:1-10)

OK. Having experienced the awful power and reality of death and unbounded evil on Friday, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb of Jesus early that Sunday morning. But the body is gone! She assumes someone must have taken it, and runs to tell the disciples. Peter and John come to see for themselves. They confirm that the body is gone, but don't really understand what has happened. Their sense of despair and hopelessness remains unchanged, which is understandable. They had believed that Jesus had power over sin and evil and death, but clearly the events of Good Friday demonstrated to them that he didn't. And the hope they had for the coming of a new kind of world was shattered.

A few weeks ago, I wrote a letter to the congregation explaining how we would be responding to the Coronavirus here at GPC. Near the end of the letter I wrote, we believe in "God's sovereignty over the Creation and over each one of us. God is still in control, even when it doesn't feel like it!" One of our members sent the letter back to me with this note, "If God is in

control, I hate to think what things would be like if the devil was in control!”

Point taken!

Like those early disciples, some of us have had the props kicked out from under our comfortable lives. Everything seems to have turned upside down. Some of us have lost our jobs. Some of us are having to work in very difficult circumstances. Some of us are doing school from home, and others are teaching from home in ways we weren't trained for! Some of us, particularly the extroverts, are feeling very lonely and cut off from family and friends. Other are feeling smothered by living in constant, close proximity with those in their household. And at some level, each of us is being confronted with the reality of our mortality. Lots of people are getting their wills updated as well as their medical powers of attorney. I know I've done some thinking about my own mortality, as I'm in one of those groups that is more vulnerable to the serious effects of the virus.

Most of us usually avoid thinking about death. Our culture has been called a “death-denying” culture, and it insulates us from death's reality pretty well. But the fact remains that death gets each and every one of us eventually. It may be Covid 19 or it may be a car accident or cancer or old age. But the death rate, even in the wealthiest country in the world, is still 100%. We are coming face-to-face with that right now as we see celebrities and other well-known people dying, and the overwhelming

number of deaths in places like NYC. And that puts us right where Mary and those early disciples were on that Easter morning- face-to-face with death. Fortunately, this wasn't the end of the story for them, or for us!

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)

A couple weeks ago, I saw an editorial in the Gettysburg Times written by a self-proclaimed atheist. He made fun of area churches

because they cancelled public worship services, rather than trusting God to protect them from the virus. Was he right? Does canceling worship demonstrate a lack of faith in God's protection? I don't think so. In fact, I think this atheist has a fundamental misunderstanding of what Christian faith teaches. From earliest times God's people have experienced the normal hardships and tragedies of this world- enslaved Hebrews in Egypt, ancient Israelites harassed by surrounding enemies, famines and wars, and early Christians persecuted violently for their faith. God never promised to protect us from such things. But, God does promise to walk with us through them, and promises that a better world, a good world under God's reign is coming. Jesus' death and resurrection is a sign to us of that coming time when God will overcome death and evil, and will bring peace and harmony to our world. And sometimes, God gives us glimpses of that world to come.

I usually don't repeat stories that I tell you, but it's been ten years since I used this one and I think it bears repeating. Many years ago I traveled to MacDowell County, West Virginia to scout out work for a youth mission trip. We were to do home repair for needy Appalachian families. On the set-up trip, I specifically remember visiting the home of a Mrs. Green. Although Mrs. Green was not home at the time of my visit, the house conveyed a sense of despair- of someone who has given up hope

for this life. There was clutter all around the yard and on the porch. Several windows were broken out, allowing the cold mountain weather to infiltrate the house. Inside, I noticed a large unrepaired hole in the floor, and the whole house was badly in need of cleaning. Nothing had been painted in years.

The next time I visited the house was early during the week of our mission trip. One of our crews was busy at work. They were repairing windows, replacing rotted floor joists, fixing that hole in the floor, weatherstripping doors, etc. Mrs. Green was there with her disabled husband and their three children, one of whom was mentally-challenged. She was not aware that God was working through those Sr. Highers and adults to do far more than repair her house. She was about to experience the real meaning of her name.

The work crew reported that early in the week, Mrs. Green and the kids were not very communicative. They kept to themselves and watched the work from a distance. However, as the week went on, the Greens became much more involved. One morning, the crew arrived and saw what they believed to be a brand-new kitchen floor. They later learned that Mrs. Green had worked hard all night to clean and paint it. It just looked new!

Later in the week, the Greens took the initiative to put curtains on the windows, cleaned up the junk from around the house, and readily pitched in to help with the work. And they welcomed an opportunity to pray with the group when it was presented to them.

And Mrs. Green, Mrs. Easter Green, experienced personally the meaning of her name. Through the labor of ordinary folks like you and me, she experienced the truth that Jesus is alive and that she is not alone in her suffering. She learned that things can get better for her. She learned that God knows her name- and her address! And she experienced the fact that this same God uses regular people like us to demonstrate his love and care to others. The knowledge that God was with her in her predicament gave her renewed hope and the courage to try to rebuild her life.

That's the message of Easter for us this year as we cope with the restrictions and fear of illness with which we are dealing. Jesus is alive and with us, and this disease will not have the final word.