

We, at Bay View, are currently using two scripture readings for our worship services. For this Sunday, we then had five scriptures to choose from. This week, we had the options of two Gospel Readings.

The Gospel reading for the day was Mark 16:1-8. However, there was also an alternative Gospel reading which we read and came from John 20:1-18. I chose the Gospel of John for two reasons, one, it will help us build on the story for next week and then I also appreciate how John shares the story of Mary.

I then chose the Acts text because of the words of Peter. Now, let us wrestle with these texts.

I do not have to tell you that this year has been a very long and hard year. Mary went to the tomb of Jesus and we, as a nation and a world have seen so many tombs—and countless deaths that could not even have proper tombs— since the outbreak of COVID-19. When I finished up this sermon on Friday, the worldwide total was 2.83 million deaths. Here in the U.S. the total has pushed above 553,000 and here in our state of Wisconsin, that total alone has been over 7,300.

With those deaths, there has been so much grieving and weeping. The pandemic brutally took our loved ones. We need to make sure that we create time and space for that lament and I am not sure that we truly have done that. This is especially true of deaths and funerals that were unable to have visitations, prayer serves and services in our sacred spaces. Then, many of us were afraid of our own potential deaths. I think that in the Gospel of John, we might be able to see us in Mary and the disciples and there is a message that can truly bring us peace and comfort.

In the Gospel of John, the resurrection story is a little different. We visit the tomb of Jesus when it is still dark, just like Mary Magdalene (John 20:1). She sees the stone removed from the tomb. The message she delivers to Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved is about the missing body. John's resurrection story is not triumphant but instead leads us to look into the reality of death, where we unexpectedly but intimately encounter the risen Jesus.

This somber side of the story is different than many Easter celebrations that we imagine. It was not an overly joyous time for Mary and the disciples when there was no body in the tomb; that is what they were expecting.

The male disciples, they left and later, we later find out that they leave to go back and lock themselves in a room. Mary, however, chose a different path. She stays. She weeps. She cries and wails. She then steps inside the tomb and is asked the following question:

“Woman, why are you weeping?”

Her words and response are the same that she gave to the disciples; the only logical response that she knows:

“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him”

After she responds, she turns around and Jesus asks the same question. Mary does not realize that it is Jesus though. She believes it to be the gardener. With this belief, she thinks maybe he had taken Jesus, so she thoughtfully responds, “Sir, if you took him, will you so kindly tell me where you have placed him so I can care for him.

Then, it came.

The word.

Mary.

Immediately, she knew it was him. She exclaimed TEACHER

All she wanted to do was give him a big hug and cling to him. However, she was unable to do that just yet, he had not yet ascended. So, Jesus says, do not cling to me, I have to ascend to the Father, but go now and tell my brothers.

Mary went immediately sharing the good news.

We, as a church are getting a little better in realizing the importance of women and their role in the church. However, we still have a way to go, even though we can clearly see Jesus giving Mary the task of spreading the news.

Each and every time that we read Scripture, there is something different that normally jumps out. That is the power of the Holy Spirit and the Living Word. I am pretty sure that it is because we are in the midst of a global pandemic but here are two things that jumped off the page to me.

One, Mary just wanted to cling to Jesus. She just wanted to hug him. She probably wanted to place the head on his shoulders and now let the tears that were once sadness and that are now joy, to run freely. I am sure that there are so many of us that wish that. We wish that we can feel the touch, the hug, the embrace and for us to know, all is going to be okay.

Two, Even though the embrace did not occur yet, it would come, Jesus was there. The risen Christ was standing right there. Right there in front of her. Jesus was showing her that death is not the final word. He was showing her and us that God's love embraces the living and the dead. Jesus was there to comfort Mary in the midst of her suffering. The same Jesus is here for us. Let me be explicitly clear to you, the intimate presence of the wounded Christ is our comfort.

With that foundation, I just want to briefly enter into the Acts reading because there are some words that I want to highlight. This comfort and good news is for all. It is not limited. It is inclusive, not exclusive. Here is the ultimate Good News. **God shows no partiality.**

In his speech or sermon, I think that we can see a shift in some of his beliefs and actions. The resurrection of Jesus made an impact on his life. It changed him. His thinking and perception changed. In his life, he had some deeply ingrained beliefs that were rooted in his previous teachings. Yet, he is now at a place where he goes, this news is not just for me, it is for all.

Friends, I want to challenge you to let the Easter story challenge you. You are here, I am assuming because you are affirming the resurrection of Jesus. If that is true, this story should change the way that you think and act. We need to make sure that we are inclusive and not exclusive and show love and no partiality even to the individuals that we come in contact with who come from a different ethnic group or not in the same socio-economic status as us or those who are not in the political party that we identify with or maybe the big one; even the same religious group.

We need to be life-affirming.

In closing, let me share with you something that I have found powerful in this Acts passage and something that might get me in trouble at times. Peter in this text essentially looks at a Roman centurion, a military leader serving Rome that Jesus and not the emperor is the Lord of all. Now that is Bold.

So, this is my tough question that I ponder and ask you to ponder:

Does our belief in the resurrection likewise lead us to speak truth to power?

Amen.