

Three Disciples and an Empty Tomb – based on John 20: 1-18  
Aspen Community UMC  
March 23, 2008 - Easter

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What was it like for those three people?  
What would it have been like for us had we been there?  
We have such a small grasp on this resurrection story,  
but if we contemplate how it was for the three who John tells us about -  
maybe we can find ourselves in the picture.  
Mary Magdalene, Peter, and another disciple known as the one Jesus loved.

We know that after the crucifixion and resurrection,  
the people who knew Jesus, and some who did not,  
experienced his presence in a way they had never before felt anyone's presence  
and that is why we celebrate today.

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Let's go back to the story from the Gospel of John.  
John's account of Easter morning is a series of discoveries,  
small steps of learning that lead to the Risen Jesus.  
They were discoveries by three people – three disciples.

At dawn, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb and sees that the stone has been removed.

At the moment she sees nothing else.  
She runs to Peter and the other disciple, the one called the beloved disciple,  
and they run to the tomb.

Everybody seems to be running.  
The other disciple looks into the tomb, something Mary had not done.  
He sees the linen burial clothes lying there.  
Peter takes the discovery one step further and enters the tomb  
and sees the same burial cloths are empty.

After Peter and the other disciple leave, Mary finally looks into the tomb,  
something she had not done before, and sees angels.  
Then, looking away, she sees Jesus himself although at first  
she mistakes him for the gardener.

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She mistakes him for the gardener.

At each stage something new is revealed,  
some new part of the mystery becomes a little more clear.  
Something has happened that had never happened before.

A new truth about life was before them – before us.  
What to do with it – what can it mean – it's almost too big to fathom.  
As Marcus Borg would say, "Jesus took us where none had ever been."

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You know, there is more documented evidence that Jesus rose from the dead  
than there is that Julius Caesar ever lived.

There is more evidence of the resurrection than there is  
that Alexander the Great died at age 33.

It is interesting that some will accept thousands of facts for which  
there are only shreds of evidence,  
but in the face of overwhelming evidence of the resurrection we are skeptical.

It is so very unique. We like facts.

Well, the facts are that in the history of the ancient world  
the resurrection has been attested to  
as much as most of the events that we routinely accept and read in the history books.

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I keep thinking of these three people – these three disciples.

How might we see something of ourselves in them  
and experience something of the resurrection through them?

Or, how might their relationship to Jesus  
give us deeper insight into knowing God,  
and this amazing thing that happened.<sup>1</sup>

Let's consider first the "beloved disciple."

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He pokes his head into the empty tomb. He is the first of the three to believe.

John tells us that he saw and believed. He believed what he saw.

He does not wait to analyze the evidence, or have to see the wounds  
like Thomas will have to see.

He had been an obedient disciple, walked with Jesus through his ministry.

He was not going to stop now. It was a walk of faith.

We might call him the disciple of faith.

Are you a disciple of faith?

And there was Mary, certainly a disciple.

She was courageous. She stood at the cross when the others ran away –  
cowering from the Romans.

She was out early before dawn – after the Sabbath – to visit his grave.

She is the first to weep over the body's disappearance.

She is the first to see and recognize and proclaim the risen Jesus.

She knew he had valued her contributions, her gifts.

She shares her grief and her love so openly.

She hears him call her name.

Her life had become chaos. She needed to be grounded  
and she was when she heard him call her name.

She is the disciple of love.

And finally, there is Peter.

Peter is the first of the three to actually go into the tomb and look around.

He needs evidence. He evaluates what he sees:

empty tomb - stone rolled aside - burial cloths - no body.

He lives in a world of rationality, of cause and effect.

He does not see the resurrected Jesus -

not until he hears the story from Mary, and that convinces him.

Then it becomes real to him.

Peter is the disciple of hope, because he is so much like most of us  
because he has made so many mistakes. And, he just hopes it will work out.

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He had fallen in the lake trying to walk on water. He denied Jesus just a few nights before.

It seems that he often misunderstood,  
But he was steadfast once he grasped the idea.  
Let's call him the disciple of hope.

Are there parts of you here in these disciples?

Are you that faithful companion who saw and believed and followed?

And today, you do the same.

You will continue to follow – your faith is reliable and real.

But now you will move forward with a new knowledge  
that death is not the end of a person's story -  
that your story is rooted in the heart of God.

Can you be the disciple of faith?

Or, do you count courage to be one of your best characteristics?

And while you may be afraid,  
you know what he meant to you and what he did for you.  
You love him as a dear friend.

At first you mistake him for the gardener,  
but from time to time you have not recognized him when he was there for you.

And now you realize it is time for a new vision of this Savior – of yours -

And now he calls.

Can you be the disciple of love?

Or, are you the disciple who tries to understand it with your rational mind  
only to miss some important things -  
like seeing him because it is hard to shift your thinking – process it fast enough.

You need to learn it one step at a time and work it out.

But once you are there you are as steadfast as they get.

You know that no one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in  
the - heartbreak - of dark places - where hope cannot be seen.

Its taking you some time but you are trying to put it all together.

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You just hope you get it right. Are you the disciple of hope?

I expect there is a little of each of these disciples in us. I hope so.

Each disciple is receiving the risen Christ is a different way  
and each of us sees him, hears him, trusts him, walks with him - a little differently.

For some it comes easy.

We see it and believe it, and perhaps it's not even that.

We are there and we join in the journey for we know what we are called to do.  
The most important thing is the companionship and the adventure we are on together.

The journey itself is where you really get to know Christ.

For others it is not so easy, and it takes attention to feelings  
it takes remembering the relationship - and that gives you courage

to be there when things get real tough.

But you have heard him call your name  
and that restores something that seemed doomed to death.

You hear your name.

And there are some of us for whom it is hard to understand  
and it seems we just make it harder by our denials, our mistakes,

And our insistence on what we think we know  
rather than what we might know if we opened ourselves to the possibility.

But we mean well, and we are a good disciple nevertheless.

Do you find yourself in one or more of our witnesses to the resurrections?

These people are not really different than us.

They just landed a big part in a big story.

And inside this big story of the resurrection - are our own stories.

I believe that story of the empty tomb tells itself again and again in your life and mine.

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The divine reveals itself when we are able to walk out of some empty tombs in our own lives  
when we thought all was over - when all seemed dead.

And if we have no vision to remind us, inform us,  
give us a glimpse of resurrection - we often do die.  
And if it is not a physical death, it may be a spiritual death.  
Yes, there is the big story – and our stories that are there within it.

I believe heaven opened up that day  
so we can begin to know the nature of divine love.  
And that's the message of joy for our world – our broken world.  
That is the message of joy for your life and mine.

I wish for you for this Easter (as if on the bigger stage of new life in Christ)  
a new sense of divine energy and purpose for your life.  
And I wish for you (on the small stage of your own life)  
an unfolding of those burial cloths that bind  
some part of your life that needs to be alive -  
that needs to come out of that tomb.

So, I invite you to let these disciples into your life  
for they were there, and they lived to tell the story  
so that you and I can know it -  
So that we can continue our journey of faith -  
So that we can hear him call our name -  
And so that we can – with Peter – live in hope.  
May we know these things.

May the joy and peace of Easter be with you. Happy Easter!

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Craig Kocher." Theolog". The Blog of The Christian Century 3/17/08