

Do You Know Where Jesus Is?

John 20:1-18

March 23, 2008

Some Christians have a terribly unfortunate regard for the place of women in the world. Some of the most damaging attitudes have been created because of some unfortunate misinterpretations of the creation story in the Old Testament. One young pastor thought it important that he share with his congregation one Sunday just how bad he believed women to be. He went on and on about how the trouble the world was in was due to women.

As people were leaving the service that day, a particularly husky woman went up to him and took hold of his hand – rather firmly. He cried out, “That hurts.”

She seemingly ignored his observation and proceeded to ask him, “What was the telephone number of the Garden of Eden?”

He winced as he answered: “I don’t know.”

She squeezed his hand even harder and asked her question again. He again said, “I don’t know.”

She then said, “The telephone number of the Garden of Eden is ‘ADAM ATE ONE, TOO’ (Adam-8-1-2).”¹

The author of the Gospel of John certainly provides us a different image of what our attitude toward women should be. My guess is the author picked it up from observing the way Jesus treated women.

The author’s way of telling what happened that first Easter morning should leave us with no doubt that the attitude of the early church should have been that women play a significant role in the experiencing and the sharing of the good news. According to the author of the Gospel of John, the first one to observe the empty tomb was a woman. According to the author of the Gospel of John, the first one to recognize the risen Savior was a woman. According to the author of the Gospel of John, the first one to share the good news with others was a woman. Oh, and not just any woman, but Mary Magdalene.

Now, there’s an interesting fact to include in one’s account of the resurrection – the one most willing to risk the ridicule of those who put Jesus to death, the first eyewitness, the first evangelist – was a woman some claimed had a bad reputation. This is Mary Magdalene we were talking about here – not Mary, the mother of Jesus – not Mary, the mother of James and Salome – but, Mary from the town known for its prostitutes who hung around the Roman soldiers stationed there. Magdala was a town steeped in sin and wild living.

One commentator asked: “Why would God entrust such important news to a woman from a wicked town?”² Do you find it as interesting as I do that at this pivotal moment in history – at this dramatic turn of events - the one to whom the resurrected Christ first appeared wasn’t to any of the twelve or the High Priest or Pontius Pilate, but to a woman that might have formerly been a prostitute? I would like to suggest to you this morning that this is the Gospel at its very best. “Easter is not only about life beyond the grave. It is about the new life of grace and acceptance that is available here and now.”³ Mary Magdalene being the first to encounter the risen Christ is God making an unbelievably powerful statement to us and that is that whoever you and whatever your background might be – the good news is for you! It is for everyone of us no matter what our past has been – no matter what a mess we’ve made of our lives.

The good news that this story tells us is that Jesus is wherever there are people in need of having their lives turned around – that Jesus is wherever there are people in need of being healed of their guilt – that Jesus is wherever there are people in need of hearing they are forgiven – that Jesus is wherever there are people in need of knowing that their lives can be made whole.

I wish I could share with you the stories of all the people who've share with me that their lives were changed because of an encounter with Jesus Christ. Another minister tells the story of a woman he knew who was married for 25 years and had grown children. He shares how despite how long her marriage had survived, it wasn't necessarily a healthy or happy one. The woman later shared with him that she and her boss had been having an affair for over two years.

The pastor tells how she went to church one Sunday morning and all of a sudden the relevance of the gospel to her life came into full view. She made an appointment to see the pastor in his office and there she told him how she felt God wanted her to change the direction of her life. She said that she was unsure she could do it but felt with God's help she wanted to give it a try. She began by breaking off the relationship with her boss. Then she started to try and renew the relationship with her husband. What resulted was that she became a good and honorable woman trying to live her life faithfully with God.

This is Easter Sunday and I am in hope that there are some here this morning who have thought that the resurrection was all about there being some place to go after we die, who will hear the good news in a fresh and healing way: that there is nothing that needs to separate us from encountering Jesus Christ and having our lives made whole – that there is nothing that makes us unworthy of God's love – that our empty tomb existence is not all there is.

Well, there's another scene in today's scripture reading that I think provides us some insight this morning into the whereabouts of Jesus in our day. It's that scene where later in the day on that first Easter Sunday when the disciples were gathered together behind a locked door in fear. The activities of the week had gotten to them. They were fearful that the ones who got Jesus would start looking for them.

It's also quite probable that there was some grieving going on behind those closed doors to give them some time to get used to life without Jesus. And then it happened. The Risen Christ appeared in the room with them and said, "Peace." To prove to them that it really was him he showed them his hands and side. The dark tomb couldn't hold him and closed doors weren't able to stop him either.

One preacher offered: "Here is Easter hope. The resurrection doesn't simply mean that Jesus rose to eternal life. It doesn't simply mean that we hope to see our loved ones when we die. It also means that the very first thing that the Risen Christ does is return to the same cowardly and misunderstanding disciples who had so disappointed and forsake him. He came through their locked doors."⁴

Where is Jesus? Where is the Risen Christ? I would suggest to you that he is wherever there are locked doors trying to keep him out. Locked doors like those we attach to our hearts when our despair is out of control because we have come to the point of feeling like out loved one will never really be able to control their addiction – locked doors like those we've inserted on our willingness to turn to God because we've felt disappointed by God's actions or inactions in the past – locked doors which symbolize our remorse because we've come to believe that we have done too much to expect God to forgive us – locked doors we've allowed to fester inside us because of our stubbornly choosing to go it alone in the face of death or serious illness.

Closed doors - like our having trouble believing – like the doubts residing in our minds – like fear – like our remembering the times we have failed to live up to what we believe it means to follow Jesus.

Listen: hear the good news again this morning – “the Risen Christ can come through locked doors. There is no security system that’s been devised that can keep you safe from his incursions. He came to his first disciples and he promises to keep coming back to us, keep intruding among us, keep pressing in upon us, and keep opening the door that we don’t know how to unlock. Even in the dark door of our deaths, Christ promises not to forsake us, to keep coming back for us, keep talking to us, and breathing upon us.”⁵

William Willimon, former chaplain of Duke University, now Bishop Willimon, writes about listening to an interview with Jane Fonda. He noted how he has followed her acting career, remembering her work in “Klute” and “On Golden Pond,” and her vilification for traveling to Hanoi during the Viet Nam war, her marriage to Ted Turner and her exercise video.

He wrote that “the interviewer kept trying to get Jane to talk about all that, all she wanted to talk about was her newfound relationship to Jesus. She is a Christian, a vibrant, exuberant believer who is eager to tell the world what Christ is doing through her.”

And Bishop Willimon ended his piece with: “I guess that means that John 20 is true! The Risen Christ moves through locked doors. If he can get to Jane, he ought to have no trouble getting to you!”⁶

There’s another place I believe the Risen Christ can be seen – the Risen Christ is – and that is in us – in our hearts, minds, and actions. I think I say something like this every year. I say it over and over because I think it’s such a powerful image. I believe in the resurrection because of you – because of the church – the community of believers. We are the living proof of the Risen Christ – we are the living, the physical, Body of Christ.

Imagine what could happen in the world if a bunch of people like us who physically look nothing like Jesus simply chose to physically act like him. You know, served with humility – spoke passionately about the needs of the poor and put our lives on the line because of how important we believe doing something about poverty is, the importance of improving race relations. Imagine what could happen if we lived generously and if we did justice.⁷

I hope you didn’t come here this morning expecting to find Jesus embalmed in one of the creeds or in some ritual. I hope you didn’t come here this morning expecting to find him entombed in the halls of this building.

Jesus Christ lives. He is wherever people are suffering – wherever people are living in fear – wherever people are reaching out to bring wholeness to others – wherever people are offering acceptance – wherever people are serving – wherever people are lost and lonely – wherever his followers are attempting to act like him.⁸ Remember these things: A Christian is ...

- * A mind through which Christ thinks.
- * A heart through which Christ loves.

- * A voice through which Christ speaks.
- * And a hand through which Christ works.

Let us pray.

1. King Duncan, “An Unlikely Witness,” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. William H. Willimon, “Through Closed Doors,” Pulpit Resource, January – March, 2008, p. 55 – 56.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. “Being Jesus,” Homiletics, March/April, 2008, pp. 35 – 38.
8. Brett Blair and staff, “Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Network, 2004), 0-0000-0000-01.