

TELLING THE WHOLE STORY
(Why storytelling makes a difference)
The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
John 20

A note to the reader. This sermon was preceded by telling the Resurrection appearance and doubting Thomas story from the gospel of John. This is a much longer passage than is in the lectionary. The reasons are below.

Last week on Easter I told the complete resurrection story from Matthew. This week I did the same thing with John and I plan to do the same thing next week for Luke. One thing that I have learned in my storytelling work is that the lectionary is not the friend of the bible story. It is a great preaching tool, but when we chop the story up we lose an important breadth and depth not to mention the beauty of a complete story. As you will find out next week telling the entire story in context also brings out points you miss when you break the story up.

Secondly the lectionary presents the stories out of sequence. For example last year the Feast of the Annunciation where the angel comes to Mary actually fell during Holy Week. So it was moved to the week after Easter. Now stop and think that in the midst of the great 50 days of Easter we have the angel appearing to tell Mary that she is going to have Jesus in 9 months. That is why I'm extending the gospel each of the first three weeks in the Easter season so you hear the whole story.

Now with that said, let us turn to the resurrection story from the gospel of John. This is a challenging story for a storyteller. As I prepared this story for my show last year I noticed several things that made me pause and think what? Now let me ask, did any of you catch something different about the way I told the scene from John of Mary at the tomb? I left out the part about Peter and the other disciple the one Jesus loved.

I had learned a long time ago that this story of the two men at the tomb was probably a later insertion. The commentators spoke about it being grammatically different. Now I had never really caught it until I started to memorize the passage. I realized that in this section Mary speaks in the second person using we and she says, "they have taken the body of the Lord and we don't know where they have put him." Yet when she enters the tomb she says to the angels, "they have taken the body of MY Lord and I don't know where they have put him." The the story tells of her seeing the stone rolled away and running to the disciples, but never has her returning to the tomb. Yet as soon as Peter leaves and goes back home (not telling anyone) there she is outside the tomb weeping. Peter enters and sees the burial clothes, but does not see the two angels dressed in white. Another piece that makes me wonder.

Now the other decision I made was when to stop the story. Listen again the conclusion of the passage today. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and through believing have life in his name." When I first started to learn this for last year's visit by the bishop I realized that in the act of telling it rather than reading it, this is a very powerful conclusion to a gospel, but it isn't. So again I ask what's missing? The breakfast on the beach passage of John 21! This prompted me to contact my new testament professor at VTS and ask her, "Is chapter 21 also an insertion by a later editor?" She said, "There are many who think that is so. Just as Peter is placed at the tomb in an insertion this final appearance and designation of Peter as the one who will feed my sheep, in other words become the leader this too may be an insertion to assert Peter's place as the leader." It has long been thought that Mary Magdalene lived with John's community in Ephesus and was probably one if not the leader. The evidence for her leadership role is found in the fragments of the Gospel of Mary. Now most of that gospel was destroyed but what we have shows quite a conflict between her and Peter and Peter does not come out looking very good. Yet if Peter is to be the first Pope, well you can't have him subservient to Mary now can you. Thus started a long period of denigrating Mary Magdalene that culminated in Pope Gregory the Great declaring her a prostitute. That has only recently been rescinded.

One thing that often puzzles people is Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener. Well I will go into that question in depth next week, but stop and think about this for a moment. When Jesus appears to the disciples the wounds are there for all to see, yet there is no mention of the wounds when Mary mistakes him for the gardener. Now let that be a puzzler for you and maybe an incentive to get you to come back next week to here my explanation when we hear about the road to Emmaus.

So enough of the history lesson although I hope you found it interesting. As a storyteller I always look for what we call the MIT, the most important thing in the story. Taken as I told it this is story about believing and believing in this resurrection appearance is the most important thing. It is through believing that we have life in his name.

Believing is the most important thing when you take this story as a unit by itself and leave off the breakfast on the beach. The believing is why I told that section with Thomas the way I did, to make the emphasis not on Thomas' doubt, but on the belief of others. I find it interesting that Jesus speaks about all those "who have not seen, but have come to believe." Yet it has only been a week since Easter by the end of this story. I suspect that may be the writer of John putting words in Jesus' mouth, but that by itself tells you that belief is the point of this story for the writer of John.

Now many people identify with Thomas. I know for years I certainly did. Would you have believed the other disciples if you had not seen. Yet we have not seen, yet we believe. Belief is not the same as understanding or proof. Belief is a heart thing. Understanding and explaining are head things. Sometimes the head gets in the way of our hearts, the parts of us where God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit truly touch us.

The Resurrection, Eucharist, and Baptism are all mysteries that are meant to be explored, but not necessarily explained. They are ways our hearts become connected with the divine, allowing the divine to connect with us, with the core of our being. What happens during baptism is unique to each person. Last week one of the teens being baptized looked up at me from the font and tears were flowing down her cheeks. Something wonderful and unexplainable happened in that instant. She knew in her heart that she had become part of the mystical body of Christ. You cannot explain this, you can only experience it.

This is the most important thing in today's full passage. That even though we have not seen Jesus in the way the disciples did, we have experienced Jesus and if we pay close enough attention we will see Jesus. We just need to be looking for him, but more on that thought next week when we will be in Luke and on the road to Emmaus.