



The Inclusive Community

Easter

April 4, 2010

John 20: 1-18

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

We gather because it is Easter. We are not certain or clear what Easter faith entails. But we want to be part of it. So here we are. If we have doubts, questions, confusions, we are one with the disciples and apostles on that first Easter morning. They were even more uncertain than some of us may be. A lack of clarity is part of Easter faith.

When John is writing, the story of the first Easter is some 70 years old. That alone is astonishing. That the story is credible 70 years later! If people in the past had said, Julius Caesar is still alive, or Napoleon, or Lincoln, it would have been dismissed outright. The story would not have lasted a year.

So here we are. Not 70 years later but 700 X 3 years later, gathering because we believe that somehow this story may be true. Astonishing! A miracle in its own right.

Of all the Easter accounts, this passage in John is my favorite. So dramatic! So tender! So heart-breaking!

No story works unless it has a certain plausibility about it. A story on which we build our faith and our future needs to have even more credibility before we buy into it.

In our relationships and marriages, we build our future on the story of the one we love as told to us by that person. If we buy into the story, that this person is good or trustworthy and loves us, we stake our life on it. Never fully certain but sufficiently believable, we go forward.

The stakes in this story are high. John tells us we can build a life, a ministry, a faith on this.

What does he say?

It is dark as the story begins. A woman, apparently alone in John's account, is out at night. A dangerous situation. She is walking to a cemetery. Whatever compelled her to do this is not clear. Other evangelists say she came to finish the anointing of the body, hastily buried, on Friday. But John says "no." The body was anointed lavishly in John's burial story. With one hundred pounds of myrrh and spices! Even a king is not buried so extravagantly. So, there is no point to come to the tomb, for this.

She had a restless night. She has no expectation of an Easter event. That is clear throughout. She wanders through the streets, apparently wanting only to be near the tomb.

There is enough light for her to see that the tomb is open. She falls back in terror, too frightened to go forward. Imagine if in the night, at a cemetery you found an open tomb of a relative! She runs to Peter and a "beloved disciple". She is convinced, not of a resurrection but of a robbery. Three times she mentions that the body has been "stolen".

Everyone is running in this account. Peter and the beloved disciple run back with her. Who would steal the body? Is Mary mad? If the body is gone, can we find out who took it?

The beloved disciple arrives first, looks into the tomb but does not enter it. He reels back – the linens!: "The linens; they are still there; no one steals a body by unwrapping it first; this is not a robbery; he is alive." Peter, incredulous, moves the beloved disciple away and walks into the tomb. Peter deserted the crucifixion. He did not see the burial. He is a broken man. He walks into the tomb of the friend and Messiah he had abandoned. What a moment for a dramatist or film maker to present Peter, what is going through your mind and heart?

Peter turns over the linens. The linen covering the head of the dead Jesus is not only moved but rolled up carefully, to the side. This is no robbery. He turns to the beloved disciple and says: "I do not understand. He is not here, The body is gone. It has not been stolen." John writes that they did not "understand." He uses that word. But they "believed", without understanding. We are not expected to understand Easter. We believe it. There is no other way to encounter Easter. There is just enough credence, not very much, to keep our faith from being fantasy. The rest you make up with belief.

We do this when we get married. Enough evidence to keep our decision from being reckless. That's all we get. The rest is faith.

John says Peter and the beloved disciple go home. Not running. A stunned and slow walk home.

John focuses on Mary Magdalene. She is the apostle of Easter, the only believer who, every evangelist says, was at the cross and at the burial.

This brave and radiant woman is cries uncontrollably. It is still early morning. All the darkness is not gone. She is not weeping for the death or the loss of Jesus. She weeps because she is convinced that someone desecrated the body, took it away, stole it.

John says she heard an angel's voice ask why she is weeping. She shouts back: "someone stole the body."

Something directs her to turn around, away from the tomb. The tomb does not matter anymore. She never enters the tomb.

She sees someone she never saw before. She is still alone. This stranger asks her why she is weeping. Any decent man might ask a weeping woman such a question. Can I help? You are looking for someone. You keep looking everywhere.

'Did you take the body', she asks? Are you a cemetery, garden attendant? Did someone take the body? What did you see? Help me. I am so devastated. Who would have done this? He already suffered so much. Crucified, abandoned, and now this desecration.

When we are severely upset, we talk wildly to anyone, even strangers.

If you took the body, do not keep it. Just tell me where it is. And I will put him back in the tomb. Help me. Whatever your motive in taking the body – just help me.

With tears running down her face, she hears the stranger say, the sweetest word, the most tender, intimate moment in the entire New Testament: "Mary," Oh, It is you, Rabboni. How much I miss you, Rabboni.

In Matthew's Gospel, the women embrace the feet of Jesus on Easter morning and worship him.

In John, and he had read Matthew, she moves to embrace Jesus, but he will not allow it.

John has Jesus say: "This morning, I am not yet all I am to be. To leave a tomb is not enough. Easter is not about coming back to life. It is not a corpse resuscitated. It is not a return to life as we know it. I did human life already. Easter means finding God. Peter and the beloved disciple have gone home. I am going home also. You will find me now, not as someone you can hold onto the way you once did. You can find me now every time you look for and believe in God. I will be there always. Look for me there. And I will be with you every Easter, everyday, whenever a group of you come together in faith and friendship and fidelity. I will be there at every gathering in love and in every communion of life you experience with one another. Mary, go to all the others and tell them this. The tomb does not matter. I want you to focus not on whether the tomb is empty but on whether your heart is empty."

Easter is not an empty tomb or a corpse revived or a dogmatic statement about resurrection or an event that gives you cognitive certitude. Easter is going home, finding home. Home is an act of communion with the people you love. Home is not having an empty heart. Mary, tell the disciples this. It is no longer a time for miracles from me. The miracle is the community you make, the home you build, the people you love. Do this and I will always be there, with God, in the Spirit, in your midst. That is how you will hold me now.

And then he was gone. Mary walked home slowly. She went to where Peter and the disciples were, to their homes.

And looking at them, she said simply: "I have seen the Lord." At this point, she alone had seen the risen Christ." "I have seen the Lord." "The Lord is here, with us. We will never lose him again. O Peter, I have seen." And John adds: "she told them" all she had just experienced.

The first storyteller of Easter was Mary. No longer weeping. No longer lost. Mary Magdalene gives birth to the Risen Christ and gives us our first Easter. "I have seen the Lord," she says. Now, it's our turn to see him here. Happy Easter! Peace!