
Do Come In

John 20: 1 - 18

A sermon preached in Sarah P. Duke Gardens at Sunrise on April 8, 2012

by the Revd M. Keith Daniel

According to John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb early while it was still dark. She discovers the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away. Seeing that, Mary takes off running. Now I don't know if you knew this but Mary was very fast. In seconds she dashes back to town to tell Peter and the beloved disciple. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and the disciple, apparently think Mary is pulling their legs. The text says, Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. "Man, came you believe Mary. She must be trippin" (i.e, kidding). They have see to believe. The beloved disciple looks at Peter and says, "Bro, I bet I'll be you there." I don't know if yall knew this, but these two cats were very fast. The Beloved Disciple ran the 100M in about 11.22 seconds which is about my fastest time during by Duke football playing days. According to the text, he dusted Peter and arrived at the tomb first. He bends down (perhaps to catch his breath) looks in the tomb and sees the linen cloth, but no Jesus. Peter, however, goes inside the tomb and carefully examines the evidence. The other disciple goes on in. Mary wasn't pulling their legs. They start back toward home, both believing and yet befuddled.

Mary remains outside the tomb, waiting, watching, weeping. Weighed down by grief (while gasping for her breath), she bends to look inside the tomb. She sees two angels in white sitting where Jesus laid, one at the head and one at the feet. These cherubim appear in stark contrast to those depicted in Genesis (3:24ff) blocking Adam and Eve from reentering the Garden of Eden after the fall. Almighty God, as an act of mercy, placed cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to prevent them from eating of the tree of life and becoming eternally separated from God. Contrary to those guarding angels, these tombstone cherubim have a welcoming disposition. John surely knows these angels will resonate in his readers hearts and minds of the golden cherubim described in Exodus 25. It reads,

“Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold...; and you shall make Two cherubim of gold;... Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. The cherubim will spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.”

In antiquity cherubim were adornments of a throne. The posture of the cherubim Mary sees appear as though they are inviting her to come into the tomb. It as if they were saying, “Do come in. Be not afraid. Do come in woman of God. We know you’re tired from running. Why are you crying?” But, Mary’s mind is fixed on seeing Jesus. She is inconsolable until she sees him. Turning, she sees a man she thinks is the gardener. “Woman,” he says. “Why are you crying?” “Who is it you are looking for?” Mary responds, “If you have taken him, tell me where he is, and I’ll take him.” He says, “Mary.” Hearing her name in that distinctly compassionate voice gives him away. “Rabboni!” He tells her, not to hold on to him, but to go and tell the Good News. Mary takes off. She tops the Beloved Disciple’s 100M time as she sprints back to the disciples. “I have seen the Lord!” “I have seen the Lord!” Let me tell you what he told me.

I wonder which of the disciples in this narrative best represents how you came to believe in Jesus’ live, death, and resurrection?

Perhaps, like the beloved disciple, you were hesitant at first to enter into the profundity of the empty tomb. You came to belief through the scriptures, received good teaching and conducted your theological reading and have been on a few trips to the Holy Land. However, you still have a bit of a guard over your heart from the foolishness of the cross and the empty grave. Like the other disciples you need to see Jesus from beyond the inside of the tomb. You need to hear Jesus say your name too. You want to know him.

Perhaps you relate better to Peter. You know Jesus. He’s called your name many times in life. You’re like a rock most of the time when it comes to your faith in Christ the Son of the Living God. Further, you have handled all the forensic evidence. Yet, doubt and denial still stalks you. Nevertheless, you always bounce back after tragedy and rise up in triumph. You’re quick to

confront the enemy with the sword of the Spirit, and to defend the faith. Yet, you like the other disciples still need to see Jesus to hear him call you His beloved.

Others of us may more closely relate to Mary. Grief and loss in your life has been unbearable at times and you can't go another step further toward the apparent travesty of the empty tomb that represents destruction, death and defeat. Perhaps you're doubled over in grief from all the darkness and evil in the world where the innocent are imprisoned, violence abounds, the land is in desolation, and the economy stinks worse than what everyone thought Lazarus would when Jesus raised him from the dead. Perhaps the empty tomb doesn't clear up your understanding of where in the world Jesus is. Like the other disciples you need to see Jesus face to face. Take another look around the garden or your life. Take a look at the other disciples in your life. All of us are striving to go in, all the way into the full story of Easter in this 21st century hour. And still today if we look closely, we will see angels all around. I bet if you listen carefully you'll hear angels in the midst of your grief saying the Lord's mercy endures forever and ever. Maybe you'll see Jesus in the middle of all the world's groaning. Jesus hears the cry his children. Though we cannot comprehend the depth of his love, he comes to us from wherever we stand inside or outside our gravest hour. He knows all our names. In honor and praise of the matchless one. Let's all repeat after the angels and say together in our outside voice, "Jesus, Do Come In." Happy Easter.