

Who are These

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013

During the sermon this morning, we will be singing the hymn, *Who are These*, at several points. Please turn to #270 and we will sing it together now.

Who are these

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” The Easter account begins in the darkness. The pain and grief of Good Friday linger still as Mary Magdalene approaches the tomb of Jesus. Most of us prefer the joy of Easter to the grief of Good Friday. We prefer the grief to be shaken off, left behind, focusing rather on joy and life, than sadness and death. But sometimes, it’s hard to shake the gloom of Good Friday. Sometimes, Good Friday’s grief lingers, even while we long for the joy of the resurrection.

Most of the time, we stand on the hinge between night and day, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is easy to stay in the night—to stay focused on grief and pain. It's a lot like the shame that we have been thinking about this season--it loves to keep us in a Good Friday state, to keep us feeling bad and unworthy. Good Friday lingers and threatens to entomb us.

For Mary, going to the tomb of her beloved Jesus was a journey of despair and sadness. Grippled by the hold that death had on her, she goes to Jesus’ tomb, expecting it to be sealed, with his body safely inside. She does not go to the tomb expecting it to be empty....no one does. She goes to the tomb and expects to find there the body of Jesus, that she might grieve for him.

But what she finds there, “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark” is that the stone has been rolled away. She does not even enter the tomb, but sees the stone rolled away, and immediately thinks that someone has come and stolen Jesus’ body. In her grief, she

is unable to think beyond any possible explanations for the empty tomb, other than that Jesus' body has been stolen. She runs to tell Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Peter and this other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, each have their own responses to the empty tomb. The beloved disciple reaches the tomb first, looks in without entering, and takes note of the evidence: linen wrappings lying there. Peter enters the tomb first, takes in the evidence--the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the rest of the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. Based on this evidence, the other disciple saw and believed. We don't know what exactly he saw and believed, because as yet they did not understand the scripture that Jesus would rise from the dead. Perhaps what he believed was that the empty tomb was evidence that Jesus had conquered death, just as he said he would. Perhaps he believed that the emptiness of the tomb bore witness to the fact that death had been defeated, had been left behind, laid aside like the grave clothes.

Mary, unable to think beyond the emptiness and the grief, seems not to be surprised by the presence of angels in the tomb, nor does she recognize Jesus when he appears to her. But she turns to face the person she assumes is the gardener, and in turning, places herself in a position of openness, a posture of receiving.

And then Jesus speaks her name, there, in the garden, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. Mary does not know him when she sees him, does not recognize his voice when she first hears it, but when he speaks her name, she knows him. It is in the speaking of her name, a gesture so familiar, so intimate, so comforting, that she realizes that this man knows her in a way no other does, and in his naming of her, she knows him and is fully known--there is no shame, no "Mary, how could you have forgotten what I said? How could you not trust me?" There is only honour in this encounter--the speaking of her name. Until he speaks her name, he is just a gardener, and she is a grieving woman. Once he speaks her name, he is the Risen Christ and she becomes the first witness to the Risen Christ, the first apostle to proclaim the good news of the resurrection.

We can't explain the resurrection. There were no witnesses to what happened there in the tomb. The resurrection was between God and Jesus. We can't explain the resurrection, there is no way to prove it, but we know it happened because the resurrection addresses us like it did Mary, it calls out to us, it names us—Mary! And in that naming, we too, can sing with Mary, "We have seen the Saviour! Alleluia!"

Who are these?

The resurrection calls out to us and names us. Throughout history, many people have heard and responded to the call of the resurrection—the call to live as people who have been named and honoured.

The Hon. Charles L. Murray heard his name being called. He was one of 6 people in Elkhart County in the mid-1800's to participate in the Underground Railroad helping black slaves escape to a life of freedom. He was active in the abolition movement, and his house was on one of the main thoroughfares of the county. He is the most well-known because he harboured more people than others in the county. The Goshen-Bristol road was the last link in Indiana for one of 2 main Quaker routes from the Ohio River to Michigan.
(elkhartcountyhistory.org)

The court house in Goshen was the site of a trial for slave catchers in 1848. Joseph A. Graves, a tobacco farmer from Boone County, Kentucky, and two other men were arrested in 1847 for causing a riot. In addition, they were accused of breaking down the door of Samuel Judson, the home at which fugitive slave Thomas Harris was staying. Harris was able to flee to freedom, but the men faced trial and were found guilty; however they appealed their case to the Indiana Supreme Court and on June 4, 1849, the State Supreme Court held that the Elkhart County judges' instruction to the jury was in error. (IN.gov website) The people of this county heard the call to resurrection, and heard their names being called to ensure that all people were allowed to live in freedom and equality.

They added their alleluias to the alleluias of the first witnesses to the resurrection. People who risked their safety so that all people could live in freedom and safety, regardless of colour are evidence of the power of the resurrection. Black slaves heard their names being called, and with courage embarked on a journey to freedom. Other people reached out in honour and hope to offer shelter and safe passage to freedom and safety. They have seen the Saviour! Alleluia!

Who are these?

This season of Lent, we've been listening to stories and telling our own stories to God, listening for the call of our names. This has been a time of openness and disclosure; a time of reflection and telling the truth about ourselves to God. Through the stories we have heard here in our midst, we have witnessed those who have heard their names being called and have joined in singing "Alleluia, we have seen the Saviour." Stories of moving through shame and brokenness, whether of our own doing or because of circumstances we find ourselves in, and emerging on the other side, are stories of how God has honoured the story teller by calling their name, and how the story teller has come to a place of honour themselves. Whether an experience of childhood actions, or difficult relationships, infertility or addiction, the stories we heard here in this place are witness to the fact that God's love is greater than our shame. The stories that were written down and placed in our prayer wall--over 100 of them--are witness to the power of God's healing and love, and our trust in the resurrection to defeat that which would keep us in the tomb.

Our collective stories and witness are our alleluias in the midst of a Good Friday world. Our movement from shame, to claiming our place as God's beloved children is our witness to the powers of death which would keep us from living the life that God desires for us.

We continue to be witnesses to the resurrection when we tell the truth about ourselves--to ourselves, to others and to God. We continue to be witnesses to the resurrection when we hold the stories we hear with compassion and love, humbly recognizing that these stories have been

entrusted to us, and there is no greater honour than to be entrusted with another's story. We continue to be witnesses to the resurrection when we turn toward the One who calls each of us by name, and take our place as beloved children of God.

We live into the power of the resurrection through all the simple and ordinary moments of life, when we honour the presence of others, the gifts they offer and share, their joys and struggles. We live into the power of the resurrection through the normal and daily routines we share in our homes and with our families and co-workers, as we recognize the alleluias offered by others, and join our alleluias with theirs. We live in the power of the resurrection when we deal gently and lovingly with ourselves in all our shortcomings and failures.

Standing in the light of the resurrection, we can join our voices with others who through the ages have sung Alleluia, even in the midst of uncertainty and doubt. Standing on this side of the cross, we can shout Alleluia, along with Mary at the tomb, and believers around the world. Standing on this side of the cross, **we** have seen the Saviour, **we** are filled with splendour! **We** are these who believe! Alleluia!

Who are these?