

The Gardener by Reverend Craig Lindsey – Easter Sunday April 12, 2020

There was a young man who went to college and was forever bragging to his classmates and fraternity brothers about how great his home Presbyterian Church was. What incredible Choirs, and gifted staff. All the marvelous missions that they did, locally and around the world. Even what a spectacular view the Presbyterian Church has of the mountains heights. No family or church could compare to his love of his home church far away. So not wanting to hear any more, on the Saturday night before Easter, his brothers quietly lifted his mattress and without waking him, carried him, bed and all, out to the local cemetery. At sunrise, he awoke, looked around and proclaimed: “How amazing that The Resurrection has come and A Presbyterian from Valley Presbyterian Church was the first to witness it!”

Our sermon this Easter morning is about those very first witnesses, and how they saw what they saw.

Following the Crucifixion, Nicodemus who had come to Jesus by night, Mary of Magdelane, Simon Peter, the Beloved Disciple and Joseph of Arimathea, took Jesus weight upon their shoulders and lowered his corpse from the cross. As they carried Jesus, they heard the Lambs of Passover being slaughtered. How much like that original Passover, everything was done in haste. Being late Friday afternoon, they only had time to wash the body of blood and dirt and sweat, spreading the 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes Nicodemus had brought, swaddling his body in grave cloths laying the corpse in the tomb like a sacrifice, covering his face with a handkerchief, before the soldiers sealed the tomb at sunset for the Sabbath of Passover. Friday night, Saturday, and the night before Sunday, they could not travel, they could do nothing but pray according to the Law of Moses.

The text begins that Mary came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. I have to believe that this is not only a double reference to the hour, but Mary came with her mind clouded in darkness and depression. The Gospel of John continually contrasts dark and light, Night and Day, black and white. In the last month, death has constantly surrounded us. On the television, and radio, the lack of persons on the street, all speak to this virus separating us, as bright as the sunshine, life has felt surreal as we were outside our routine. As Mary approached, she saw that the stone had been taken away. Without proceeding further she turned and ran back to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. When the Bible makes reference to turning around, the Greek word for Turning Around is “REPENT”, Mary’s spiritual and emotional state shifted from inward darkness and death to panic and flight to share with those whom she trusted. Mary is recognized as the first person to preach Resurrection, that the Tomb was Opened, Death and Burial has not had the last word; although at this point she does not understand. Those are the sermons I like the best, when the preacher begins, not knowing where the text is going to lead.

There is a curious note here, that Peter was with “The Beloved Disciple, the One whom Jesus loved.” Many have speculated which Disciple this might be, and insofar as this Gospel is attributed to John, it is often assumed John was the Beloved Disciple. But, there again, the Gospel of John is the only one of the Gospels to make reference to Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, the one who died. And in that story, there is reference to Jesus’ love of him, that Jesus wept for Lazarus. What if the Beloved Disciple, the Other one whom Mary found was Lazarus?

The two ran, the other disciple outran Peter reaching the tomb first, but dared not enter the Tomb. This is the second reference which makes me wonder if the Beloved Disciple might be Lazarus, because having been called out of a Tomb, he would be reticent to ever willing go back in. Simon Peter entered

inside the tomb and saw the linen wrappings, the cloth which had been over Jesus' face in a separate place. The Other one, this Beloved Disciple then came in and he saw and he believed. What a powerful statement, buried here, in all the Old Testament, there are only two references to people being raised from the Dead, first by the Great Prophet Elijah, then by Elisha, and in the New Testament Lazarus. What if the first to believe in more than being brought back from death to life, but believing in Salvation and Resurrection to Eternal Life was Lazarus? There is reference here, that as yet they did not know that he must rise from the dead. Jesus had said to the disciples repeatedly, that he must die, and we often think of a making a sacrifice, or a person dying, but not what might come after.

Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple both returned home, but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and finally she stooped to look in, and saw two angels in white. Throughout the Bible, Angels are messengers of God, messengers of Good News. Remember when the Shepherds were keeping watch over the flocks by night. These two ask Mary: "Why are you weeping?" And she responds that they have taken the body away and she knows not where. There is a part of us in Genealogical research, who are not only interested in who begat whom, but where are they now? To stand in the place where your ancestors have been. There is also irony here, that when Jesus had visited in their home Martha had been preoccupied with doing stuff to entertaining, while Mary had sat at the feet of Jesus. And when Jesus had come to dinner in their home after Lazarus was raised from the dead, Mary had brought in this pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus. But now, Mary is wanting to clean up, to care for Jesus as if her private possession, and she cannot. On the day before Palm Sunday, the mother of one of our flock died, and he sent to me these words originally from Benjamin Franklin:

"It is the will of God and nature, that these mortal bodies be laid aside, when the soul is to enter into real life. This mortal life is rather an embryo state, a preparation for living. A man is not completely born until he be dead. Why, then, should we grieve that a new child is born among The Immortals, a new member added to their happy society? We are spirits, that bodies should be lent us; while they can afford us pleasure, assist us in acquiring knowledge, or in doing good to our fellow creatures, this is a kind and benevolent act of God. When they become unfit for these purposes, and afford us pain instead of pleasure, instead of an aid become an encumbrance, and answer none of the intentions for which they were given, it is equally kind and benevolent that a way is provided by which we may get rid of them. Death is that way."

Mary turned again (REPENTANCE) and saw Jesus, but believing him dead could not recognize him, and thought he was the Gardener. I love that description. Simplistically, who else would be in the Tomb in the Garden at this hour of the morning but the Gardener? However, there is also a wonderful theological circle here. In the Beginning in Genesis, where was Adam placed? In the Garden. Adam was exiled from the Garden because of Sin and brokenness from God. Now, Mary sees Jesus, The New Adam as The GARDENER. The Book of Isaiah has this powerful poem underlying all of Jewish faith, that God created a Garden with grapevines and a grape-press and everything essential for life, surrounding the Garden with a wall. But the Grapevine wanted to reach beyond the wall so broken down the wall, thereby letting in the foxes which eat the grapes.

And Jesus calls her by Name, and suddenly she recognizes him. Where an Open doorway, an empty tomb, the witness of two friends, the linen cloth and handkerchief, and two angels had not gotten through to her, being called by name, suddenly allowed her to recognize Jesus. And he tells her to not hold him.

To me there has always been a curiosity about John's telling. Why the linen cloth and handkerchief folded in places by themselves. When I found something on the internet, about finish carpenters. Rough Carpenters are great at demolition, knocking out walls, taking down cabinets, but finish carpenters like Joseph's son Jesus, not only install and build, but finish and polish to completion. One of the final acts in Finish Carpentry, is to rub off all the dust, to polish to a high gleam, then to fold up the cloth and lay them over the piece. So in this time, as we wear handkerchiefs over our face and go running about in isolation, may we look forward to the time when we each will be stopped from where we were headed, turned round in repentance from death to life, and take off the handkerchiefs to breathe new life.