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Easter Sunday
April 16, 2006

John 20:1-18

Ready or Not---Here He Comes!

Every so often I like to go back and read from a book called Dear pastor, which is a collection of children's letters about God. In one of those letters a 10 year old boy named Franklin wrote to his minister and asked, "dear pastor, do you think God knows my name? Even my teacher doesn't know my name... And I've been in her class for two years." and then with a completely different concern another little boy writes, "Dear God, (this kid skipped the pastor as a go-between and went straight to the top): "Dear God, it rained for our whole vacation and is my dad mad! He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say..., but I hope you will not hurt him anyway." and the really interesting thing about this letter is how it ends. He signs it, "your friend, but I'm not going to tell you who I am." One child asks if God knows his name, the other is afraid God will find his out. One is hope, the other is fear. One wants to be known the other is afraid he will be.

When these letters are read together they capture the two very different movements in our souls. The two letters together define a

tension that many of us experience in our relationship with God. On the one hand we want desperately to know God personally we want God to know us, by name. And yet on the other hand is the fear that if God really did know us as we are, if God really did know what it is we have done or what we have failed to do -- that he would hurt us, or at least walk away from us.

Theologically we would say, punish us for our sin. And so, a part of us would like to hide and not tell God our name and hope God will not discover the truth about who we really are. Between these two desires, the one to be known by God, the other to be hid from God -between hope and fear -we live our lives.

It reminds me of the game hide and seek. There is the same sort of tension to that game -- you try to hide in a good place, but you definitely want to be found. So, while the person who is "it" counts to 100 you run around looking for the perfect hiding spot where no one could ever find you. But then, after a while, if no one does find you, you

began to worry that they have just given up and gone off somewhere else to play without you. Suddenly your excitement over your great hiding spot turns to fear that you may not be found.

When that happens you begin to give hints about where you are, remember? First you throw something in the room to make a sound to draw their attention. And if that doesn't work next you cough or maybe whistle one time, real short and quick. Finally, you just begin to yell out clues. "I'm in a closet... In the hall.. Upstairs... Underneath the old red blanket. When we play at our house and my children can't find where I am hiding: sometimes I'll cough real loud or stick a foot out from under the curtain, or push a leg out from under the bed. Adam and Sarah are much more clever when they want to be found they will start going peep! Peep! Peep! Like a smoke alarm. Because in the end, in spite of our fears of being caught, we really do want to be found. In the end, the deep need of our souls is to be found by a God who knows our name -- who knows all that we are and all that we have done -- and yet loves us still.

There is a kind of hide-and-peek feeling to this first Easter morning that we read of in John's gospel. Mary thinks she's it and that it's her job to find Jesus and so she heads off to where she is sure he will be. She knew Jesus would be in the tomb. After all, three short days ago, she had watched through tear filled eyes as they put his dead body there.

So she heads off seeking her lord, simply to pay her last respects. It is not a happy road she walks. Mary goes to mourn for him whom she loved - for him who had loved her as no one else had... But when she gets there she discovers that he is gone! Mary is shocked and upset. She still assumes that he is dead -- assumes someone has stolen his body -- and so she runs off to tell Peter and John -- she needs to get others to help her seek. Now Peter and John had given up looking for Jesus three days ago. They decided it was all over when Jesus died on the cross. They quit seeking Jesus back on Good Friday but Mary's words rouse them and together they run to the tomb and when they get there they go inside. Like Mary, they had come to look for Jesus' body but she was right, he was not there.

Even more confusing is that the grave cloths, the linens that had been used to bind his body and hold the spices next to him, were still there. But most perplexing of all was that the head cloth - a sort of napkin that covered the face - had been rolled up neatly and put over in a separate place by itself. The miracle of Easter is at first a mystery to these disciples who sought him that early morning. It is perhaps our first clue to the truth of the Easter story: none of them expected a resurrection -- what we celebrate today is no projection of those first disciple's hope -- in fact it comes to them as a great surprise.

Now what I believe John is doing here in his gospel as he describes the different reactions of these seekers to the empty tomb is to show us, in 3 freeze frames - one of Peter,

one of this "other disciple", and one of Mary - the progression and development of a vital Easter faith. Eventually of course, all three will come to believe but here, at this moment, on this first Easter morning, like us, they are at very different places in their response to the empty tomb.

Here at Community Presbyterian we talk a lot about faith being a journey and by that we mean it is a process. Faith is not a once done, forever perfect thing. We don't claim to have it all together in our spiritual lives. There are many places where we are unsure and we doubt. We struggle daily to live out our faith with integrity. And yet, nevertheless, ours is a journey whose destination is God, whose goal is knowing Jesus Christ as our living lord. And as we come together each Sunday for worship, as we meet in bible study, as we are together in fellowship and mission all over our community, we are growing in that faith and we are growing in our love for one another and for Jesus Christ as well. Faith is a journey and invites all to join us in that journey here at our church.

Lets look briefly at these reactions to the empty tomb and as we do, think about which of these three people reflects where you are in your journey of faith today. The text tells us that peter goes into the tomb, sees that it is empty, sees the linen cloths lying there, sees the head cloth rolled neatly by itself....and then goes home. He sees all that Easter is but, at this point it has no significance for him. Perhaps some of us identify with peter most at this moment, Easter is something that we observe but

which has little meaning. We may find the claim of the resurrection to be far fetched; it may seem to be an impossibility that someone who died could yet live. We come to Easter service, we hear the words and sing the songs but what impact does it have on who we are, or what we believe? When peter starts out he is like many people today: he observes the event, he sees the facts, he beholds a mystery, but as of yet...it has no bearing on his life... But it will! Faith begins the very moment we first turn to look at the empty tomb and ponder in our hearts what it means. For some of us here that faith is beginning to stir in our hearts for the first time today.

The other disciple who had also run to the tomb and got there first sees the same thing as Peter but he goes further as it says in verse 8, and believes. The gospel is very sparse on details here but it would seem that what this other disciple sees of the carefully folded linens convinces him that Jesus' body has not been stolen but that he has himself taken off the grave clothes. The other disciple (often believed to be John himself) sees the empty tomb and the folded linens and suddenly he believes. It's as though Jesus leaves the grave cloths behind as promise that never again shall death bind us fast or hold us down. It's very interesting that verse 9 tells us that john did not understand what had happened, but he does believe. Which is to say, that faith is not a matter of having all our questions answered, faith is not the same thing as certainty.

Faith is choosing to believe that what may be mystery can also be miracle -- that what may leave our minds reeling can still be reality. Faith is not absolute assurance but the decision to live life out of God's reality. Many of us gathered here today have this faith. We believe that in the resurrection that God has vindicated his son and proclaimed him lord of all. We don't fully understand it, and yet we believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and that he is alive and active today!

The second step in the journey of faith begins as we go beyond what we see, and believe that God is at work, even in the very darkest of places. And then john finishes his freeze frames with the third and final experience of faith: a personal encounter with the risen Christ. After peter and john have gone home Mary is still at the tomb - still searching for her lord -- still seeking for where he may be hidden. What she discovers however is that Jesus has come looking for her! The roles are reversed, the game is turned on its end. Jesus comes up to her, and surprises her in the garden - she does not expect him to be alive...but, "ready or not, here he comes!"

This is the gospel: that the one we look and long for searches first for us -- that those who seek him have become the sought. Mary does not recognize him until he tenderly calls her name: "Mary!" and just by the way he says it, she knows its him and she falls at his feet in worship. This is where our journey of faith is leading us: beyond merely observing the events and seeing the story unfold; beyond even believing the

facts and accepting the miracle -- the goal of faith is to encounter the living Christ: to know him personally in our lives, to hear him call our name and to fall at his feet in worship. So this Easter if you feel like your life is hidden from God feel free to cough real loud, or stick out a foot and move it around or maybe even yell out some clues as to where you are but it isn't really necessary because Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the grave so that he could find you, call you by name, and surround you with his love --. Ready or not, here he comes! Amen.