

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for Easter Day Year C
March 31, 2013
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Throughout the Lenten season we have had teaching and conversations about five practices that promote fruitfulness in Christian congregations: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Formation, Risk-Taking Service and Mission, and Extravagant Generosity. During the Great Fifty Days of Easter, we'll have Holy Conversations that will provide opportunities to share what is on your hearts and minds as you prepare for a process that will eventually lead to the calling of a rector. Fundamentally, what makes churches fruitful and what makes conversations holy is our Easter faith, without which we have no reason to exist.

How do you feel about your faith this Easter morning? Whether you are feeling insecure about your faith in the Risen Christ, or feeling smug and sanctimonious about it, or somewhere else on the scale in between, the experience of those first disciples on that first Easter morning offers an important message: *not everyone takes the same path to faith in the Risen Christ*. In John's account of the resurrection, the responses of Simon Peter, of the "Beloved Disciple", and of Mary Magdalene. Are carefully interwoven. In their responses, the writer is able to show how faith in Christ's resurrection is generated in different ways.

For instance, some people come to an Easter faith on the basis of evidence. And the process of gathering external evidence can take time! Peter arrived at the tomb second, but entered it first, looked around, saw everything and yet nothing. Then, he left. There is no evidence that what he saw generated any faith in him at all. All Peter took away from the empty tomb was a personal confirmation that indeed, Jesus' body was not present, just as Mary had reported. We might have expected this from Peter, who was not typically very deep. When we see him in the gospels, he seems to have a firm grasp of the obvious, but not much else. Things have to be spelled out to him over a period of time. At Caesarea Phillipi, he blurts out his confession of faith only to be rebuked moments later by Jesus for his superficial understanding of the meaning of his confession. When Peter was in the boat and saw Jesus on the shore, he jumped into the water to go to Jesus. Because his faith was impetuous, he began to sink. Jesus knew how Peter was when he told him that he would deny him three times before the next morning. Peter, of course, was sure he wouldn't. But he did. When Jesus told the parable of the sower, maybe he was thinking of Peter when he spoke of the seed that fell in the rocky soil (the meaning of Peter's name is rock, isn't it?) and because it was warm, the seeds sprouted fast, but because the soil was thin, they were unable to put down deep roots so the plants withered before they could produce fruit. Do you suppose it was this tendency of Peter's that caused Jesus to ask him three times if he loved him? Peter saw everything, yet nothing. Put another way, Peter's faith was mainly form, with little substance, until he had completed the task of gathering evidence. And when he did complete that task, he preached the sermon we had read to us from the Acts of the Apostles, with boldness and conviction.

Is your faith like that? All show and no go? Do you sometimes feel like you just go through the motions? Do you prefer church business meetings to Bible Studies and prayer groups and do you feel uncomfortable taking another person's hand and saying a prayer aloud with that person. Will you be the one who is most likely today to return home from this service with the vague feeling that you missed something...that others must have understood but you just don't get it? If so, perhaps your

faith is like that of Peter. But, there's hope for you as there was for Peter. There is more evidence of the resurrection than meets the eye and if you will keep searching, you will find the confirmation you need. Going through the motions can be a very good starting place. After all, you did go to the tomb; you're here, aren't you? A man once said to the theologian, Paschal, "Oh, that I had your creed, then I might live your life." Paschal answered, "Perhaps it would be better for you to live my life, and then you might have my creed." Some of us need to act our way into believing. Jesus honored the path Peter took to his faith. He gave great authority and responsibility to Peter. Perhaps it was because he knew that Peter's gathering of external evidence would eventually lead him to confirmation in the evidence from experience. And, the word of hope for those of you here today for whom faith is slow to develop is, in the words of Peter himself recorded in his second letter, "But do not forget one thing, my dear friends! There is no difference in the Lord's sight between one day and a thousand years; to him the two are the same. The Lord is not slow to do what he has promised, as some think. Instead, he is patient with you..."(2Pet.3:8-9a).

Other people come to their Easter faith in a relational way. The disciple Jesus loved ran with Peter to the tomb and arrived first, but he entered the tomb after Peter. He saw the *same* things Peter saw but his response was different. When this disciple entered the tomb "he saw and believed." But he did not know what to do with his belief, now that Jesus was gone, so he, like Peter, returned home. With no evidence but an empty tomb and grave cloths, I guess he was so close to Jesus that his faith did not need the scaffolding of vision and voice. This disciple believed, but it took more time for him to understand the implications of his belief. He had enjoyed the closeness and the affection of the Master. Being Jesus' friend had made a difference to him. He must have been able to connect what he had seen that morning with what Jesus had said to the disciples about rising on the third day. So Jesus had risen. So what? What are the implications of that resurrection for the life of this disciple?

What are the implications of that belief for your life? You have felt the warm glow of Jesus love for you, haven't you? You know how amazing grace is, don't you? The deep awareness that Jesus love is extended even to you makes you feel good. But it's a kind of private thing for you. That's one of the pitfalls of this path to faith in the Risen Christ. It can become as sentimental as the first approach can be superficial. Maybe you don't think much about sharing your Jesus with anybody else. Perhaps you don't get much out of the notion of corporate Christianity. Participation in church activities is something you consider to be optional, like volunteering for a worthy cause. Maybe making financial contributions to the church isn't any higher on your list of priorities than contributing to the United Way or any other charity of your choice. You probably consider all of those things lumped together as your tithe. Faith in the Risen Christ is for you a private thing, which you can enjoy just as easily at home as anywhere else. If this describes you, the good news for you today is that there is more, much more to that relationship. And, if you think you enjoy it now, you'll be in for a real surprise when you find out what it is like to live out its implications in the community of believers. Some think that it is this "beloved disciple" who wrote the gospel we heard this morning. It is in this gospel more than anywhere else in the New Testament that we see not only a depth of love but also a breadth of love. This writer remembered long after the first Easter that Jesus had said, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," and "love one another, just as I have loved you...I have told you this so that my joy will be in you, and your joy might be complete."

Mary Magdalene represents faith formed yet another way. The empty tomb, rather than even hinting resurrection, saddened Mary with the thought of Jesus' body being stolen. So far from faith is she that even the appearance of two angels does not break her sorrow. In fact, the voice and the appearance of Jesus do not at first stir her to belief. Only when he speaks her name does she believe.

Unlike the beloved disciple, **Mary comes to faith through the word of Christ** and by that word she must be sustained. Mary Magdalene cannot resume her old relationship with her Lord. This is Jesus to be sure; the Risen Christ is none other than the crucified Jesus, but the ministry of the glorified Christ who relates to his followers by giving them the Spirit who will abide with them forever. Therefore Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me." He wanted Mary to understand that "the past is prologue." He had other things in store for his disciples, which can only be accomplished after he is risen and ascended. She and the disciples and the church are not to long for the way it was or wish to return to some past relationship with Him. The cross and the tomb are not a "blind alley," to paraphrase Victor Hugo. "They are a thoroughfare that closes on the twilight and opens on the dawn." There is more, much more, to faith than what has gone before. Indeed, Mary is instructed not to cling to Jesus but to and tell the others. Mary's faith advanced at warp speed, carrying her to the others so that she might tell the others what she had seen and what Jesus had said.

Are you like Mary? Have you advanced through several stages of faith to the point where you know that faith in the Risen Christ compels one to share that faith? Have you plunged beneath the surface and have you discovered that faith is more than sentimentality. Congratulations! You deserve a Ph.D. in faith. But the good news for you today, just as for Peter and for the beloved disciple, is, there's more. I don't want to make Mary sound like the heroine of this story. Her path to an Easter faith is no more normative than any other. I want to remind you that this is just about the last we hear of Mary Magdalene in the New Testament. Evidently, she didn't write any gospels or letters, even get ordained, let alone elected a bishop. We have no record that Mary ever served on the Finance Committee, or Vestry, or worked on a church staff. This is her legacy: that she saw and believed and shared her faith so that others might believe, at least that one time. Don't you suppose she told her story more than once? We don't know what ever happened to her. But we do have her testimony to the Risen Christ and the promise that following his ascension the Holy Spirit would come to teach his followers and remind them of all that he had said. So, even if we don't know whatever happened to her, we do know what happened to her message. It spread around the world until it reached us. Here, today, we hear the Risen Lord saying to us as to Mary, "do not hold on to some old relationship with me." Step into tomorrow with me. Let my promise of life's victory over death give you courage and hope to go to my brothers and sisters and tell them I am alive, I am with you, and that when faith is reborn each new day, you will live.

Whatever the path you are taking in your faith development, there is one crucial question that needs to be asked: Are you making any progress, are you growing? Sometimes, others may misunderstand your growth. Nevertheless, change and growth are essential to Easter People. There is an old fable about a frog and a yeast cake seated on a park bench. Someone dropped water on the yeast cake and it began fermenting; expanding and expanding. The more it expanded, the more it crowded the frog. Finally, in desperation, the frog said, "Yeast cake, why don't you stop pushing me off the bench?" And the yeast cake said, "I'm not pushing you, I'm just growing."

Not everyone takes the same path to faith in the Risen Christ. There is not one normative way. Some respond to a word, others to evidence, and others to a relationship. But whatever the path, and whether sudden or slow, it is always faith that removes the distance between the first Easter and our own.