

Sermon Topic: Who Is It You Are Looking For? (by Rev Bernard Chao, 12-Apr-2020)

Sermon Text: John 20:1-18

1. Sequence of events on this FIRST Easter morning

- Finding the tomb empty
 - a) It was early morning and dark. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to find the tombstone removed, she didn't go in, but looked inside, and found Jesus' body missing, the tomb empty. She went to tell Simon Peter and John about what she saw, and both men ran to the tomb.
- They had not yet understood that Jesus is resurrected
 - a) John reached the tomb first, but why was he reticent to go in? Simon Peter rushes right in, John then follow suit. We know from Scripture that "he saw and believed" (v8b), but what did John believe in?
 - b) John believed in what Mary told them, that Jesus' body was gone, but did he believe that Jesus is alive? In v9 it is suggested that they have not arrived at this conclusion (that Jesus has resurrected) yet.
- The disciples left the tomb, but Mary stayed on
 - a) Simon Peter and John then leave the tomb and headed back to their place of residence, BUT Mary Magdalene, who has been staying outside the tomb while the men were inside, stays behind. She is weeping as she stood outside the tomb, traumatized. Already grieving from the unjust and brutal death of Jesus, now she faces what she believed as Jesus' tomb and body being defiled, unable to rest in peace.
- Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene
 - a) She then saw 2 angels inside the tomb, who asked her the reason for her weeping. She replied that she believed someone had taken Jesus' body away. Neither Mary nor the two disciples had come to the realization and belief that Jesus has risen from the dead.
 - b) She turns around, sees a man standing behind her, but mistaken him for a gardener. He echoes what the angels had asked Mary "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Mary then asked if the man had moved Jesus' body.
 - c) At this point in time, the man calls Mary by her name, no longer by a generic salutation such as "woman". Now, Mary looked and recognizes Jesus as the man standing in front of her. Jesus recognizes Mary, even if Mary hadn't recognized Him in her distraught state.

2. Mary, the unlikely heroine of the Easter story

- Jesus sought Mary out. He encounters the distraught Mary, who then was commissioned by Jesus to herald the news of His resurrection, and to gather the disciples before Jesus ascends to the Father.
- Jesus reminds Mary also, of her kinship with Him: that Jesus is her brother, she is His sister now (v17b: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God").
- Jesus affirms Mary's new Easter identity, her resurrection reality, that she is a child of God, and Jesus is her brother.
- Mary obeys Jesus' commission and goes to the disciples with her witness (v18), that Jesus is alive, what He said was true.
- Mary is now able to say "I follow Jesus, I believe in Him, I am part of God's family now", she is now able to claim her Easter reality.

- How about us? Are we able to declare that we follow Jesus, that we believe in him, and that we are part of God's family? Is this our Easter reality as well?
3. Story of Mary Magdalene, the silent follower, the marginalized
- Mary was a Jewish woman, a follower of Jesus and travelled with Him. She witnessed His death and burial. She supported His ministry with her resources. She was delivered from the 7 demons through the ministry of Jesus and His disciples.
 - Sometimes she is referred to as the Apostle to the Apostles, because she is the first to testify of Jesus' empty tomb and resurrection.
 - Jesus' resurrection is therefore that first Easter morning, witnessed first by someone who is not a man, and not part of the elite.
 - Mary is one of the silent members of society, an unmarried woman with a demonic history or a history of mental illness. She belongs to the marginalized group of people.
 - Sometimes we might feel like Mary: unnoticed, that we are less than others. Or we may be like Mary, having a chequered past, but we have been following Jesus for some time now.
 - Could it be that we, like Mary, be used by Jesus as worthy witnesses in front of the elites of the church?
 - Perhaps this Easter, Jesus is revealing Himself to people just like us, and reminding us that God has an Easter commission for us.
4. Living in disrupted times
- We are living in disrupted times, and we are now in the centre stage.
 - With the onset of COVID-19, churches are empty of worshippers, with Lent and Easter being so different from the past. We have never experienced anything like this. Even in the WW2, churches were not shuttered close like they are now.
 - As the events unfolded, churches first adopted precautionary measures like doing checks for church attendees and contact tracing data collection, then the service attendance has to be scaled down and worshippers spaced apart in the same worship space. And as we begin holding live streaming for services, news came that services held in churches have to be stopped and we need to go on complete live streaming. Now we wonder how to do live streaming when there is no one in church.
 - Now, churches are closed entirely. Suddenly, all the usual practices, patterns of worship and religious orders are all upset and turned upside down. Pastors, preachers and worship leaders no longer hold centre stage. Liturgies have shifted to small groups, and even this is currently impossible with the start of the Circuit Breaker month.
 - Families, homes, and individuals have taken centre stage now. We can no longer rely on pastors, preachers and worship leaders.
 - Suddenly, parents have become preachers and teachers to their children. Children have become worship leader and prophets to each other and to the adults. Working adults have become pastors and ministers to their colleagues. Youth have become missionaries to the digital generation and to the digital dinosaurs.
 - Things have become different, even for the church.
 - As unnerving, anxious, disrupted and confused as some of us may feel, perhaps this may not be such a bad thing.
 - Mary's encounter and exchange with Jesus provides us a powerful scriptural basis and call to a paradigm reorientation. To who each and everyone of us really is in the eyes of our Lord Jesus.
5. Who are you looking for?

- The question that Jesus asks “Who is it that you are looking for?” is an Easter challenge to identify Jesus accurately, and to identify ourselves more precisely.
 - Who are you worshipping this Easter? Who is it you see?
 - The real Jesus, or the version of Jesus that has been watered down over time:
 - a) By regurgitation or patterns of familiar worship that you do as a matter of familiar route or habit, with no awareness or real encounter with God?
 - b) By a dependence on the pastors and leaders to do the work of the church?
 - c) By an avoidance of God’s prompting, and commission to witness Jesus through good works and telling those that God has left in your path and life, to share the reality of Easter and Jesus with.
 - This watered-down version of Jesus is fake news. It is not life giving, and ends in a tomb that never opens.
6. Jesus’ extraordinary commission for ordinary followers
- This account in John, of Mary and Jesus, gives an extraordinary commission for ordinary followers.
 - The real Jesus emerged from the tomb, and immediately encounters His ordinary follower, and issues an extraordinary commission (v17): “Do not hold onto me, go, tell.”
 - Jesus’ Easter commission to Mary and to us tells us two things:
 - a) You are important to Him, and you are somebody, not nobody. You are made in the God’s image, loved by the Father and noticed by Jesus. You are so important that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, lives in you and fills you.
 - b) Jesus has a job for you, the responsibility for Christian ministry and witness is yours. This job cannot wait. We are to go and tell of how Jesus met you, how He healed you, what He has done for you. Jesus commissions you to tell your story of encountering Him.
7. Jesus is never constrained to the church
- The picture of the empty tomb and the picture of the empty churches, is unnerving for many.
 - Why was Mary troubled when she saw an empty tomb? Why are you troubled when you see an empty church?
 - Our nerves, our fears and our anxiety point to a pre-Easter, pre-resurrection, incomplete understanding. Post-Easter, post-resurrection reality is that Jesus is no longer in a tomb. He is alive and He has gone out!
 - The post COVID-19, post Circuit Breaker reality is that Jesus is not and never has been limited and constrained to the church. He is already everywhere.
 - That first Easter showed us that Jesus is in a hurry to save, He cannot wait.
 - Jesus is alive and already calling the rest of the world to taste and see that the Lord is good. He wants every person to experience the fullness of life and life eternally in communion with God and all the saints.
 - We are the delivery channels and social media influencers of this Good News.
 - Mary’s amazing Easter encounter with Jesus, calls us back to these truths:
 - a) I follow a living Saviour, Jesus, this is my Easter reality.
 - b) I am so important to Jesus that He calls me sister/brother, and we have the same Heavenly Father, this is my Easter family.
 - c) I have an urgent job to do, the royal commission from Jesus to tell my story of how Jesus met me, this is my Easter destiny.

Cell Group Reflection & Discussion

1. How has the goodness of God been displayed in your life? Have you ever used God's goodness in your life as an opportunity to share with others about who God is and what he has done for them? If so, who did you tell about God's goodness and how did the conversation go?

Read John 20:11-18 2.

2. What do you know about Mary who weeps at the tomb? Read Luke 8:1-3; John 19:25; John 20:1; and Luke 24:10-11.
3. How would you describe Mary's devotion to Jesus?
4. What are some possible reasons that Mary mistook Jesus as Gardener?
5. With what word does Mary respond to Jesus? What is the significance of this title? What is Mary trying to communicate to Jesus when she addresses him with the title "Rabboni"?
6. What is Jesus communicating when he makes the following statements from John 20:17: "Do not cling to me"? Does Jesus not want Mary to touch him? What does Jesus want Mary to do, that is more important than "clinging" to him?
7. How would you describe your devotion to Jesus?
8. Is Jesus your Lord, even in the midst of difficult and uncertain times? What can you do or say during times of trial and struggle that tells people around you that Jesus is your Lord?

