

Easter Day B Sermon 041209
Principal Service
Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

In the glorious name of the Risen Lord, Amen!

In true Easter tradition, every sermon should start with a joke – a way to get over the seriousness of the Lenten season.

A young woman, fresh out of college began a job as an elementary school counselor and she was eager to help. One day during recess she noticed a girl standing by herself on one side of a playing field while the rest of the kids enjoyed a game of soccer at the other. The new counselor approached and asked if she was all right. The girl said she was. A little while later, however, she noticed the girl was in the same spot, still by herself. Approaching again, the counselor offered, “Would you like me to be your friend?” The girl hesitated, then said, “Okay,” looking at the woman suspiciously. Feeling she was making progress, the counselor then asked, “Why are you standing here all alone?” “Because,” the little girl said, “Duh. I’m the goalie!”

I love John’s telling of the story of the empty tomb. It has such wonderful details in it. Things like: Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved racing to the tomb; Peter losing the race, but still entering the tomb first; the other disciples looking in the tomb, seeing burial clothing with no one in it and believing; and Mary mistaking the risen Lord for a gardener. That’s the kind of stuff you just can’t make up. You’ve just got to believe that the events really took place the way they are described here, because why

would anyone add all of these strange little details, if they weren't true? Why not just tell the story in a simple and clear way and let it go at that? As I said, I think the answer is because this really is the way it happened.

One of my favorite details of this story is that Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection – and she witnesses it alone. I love this part of the story because perhaps there is no one else in the New Testament who has gotten a worse rap than Mary Magdalene – and she *deserves* to be the first Apostle. You see, in the 7th chapter of Luke's Gospel, there is a story of a notoriously sinful woman, tradition says a prostitute, who interrupts Jesus at dinner and pours ointment on Him, in a very sacrificial and loving gesture. Then in the next chapter, we are introduced to Mary Magdalene, whom Luke says had seven demons in her that was driven out by Jesus. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory gave a sermon in which he alluded to Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman from Luke 7 and the legend took off from there. Mary became known as sinful, an adulteress, and a prostitute – none of which appear anywhere in the New Testament. But that's what people "know" about Mary.

So it seems only right to me that she should also have a place as the "First Apostle," the first witness to the resurrected Christ. John tells us that Mary was grieving after she discovered that Jesus' body was missing. She had been there faithfully waiting at the foot of the cross when He died – when all of the "real Disciples," the men, were hiding for fear of the temple authorities – and now she had come back alone to finish the

burial rituals for her beloved Teacher. When she saw Jesus she didn't know it was Him. It was not until Jesus called her name that she recognized Him. And then John tells us that Jesus' first words to her were, "do not hold on to me, I have not yet ascended to the Father." Artists have often portrayed Mary as having thrown herself at Jesus' feet. That too would be a detail I could believe.

Mary of Magdala, whatever her background was – demon possessed person; woman with years of hemorrhages; notorious sinner; adulteress; or even prostitute – most certainly knew what it meant to be touched by Jesus, to be healed, to be made whole, to be reborn. Mary had been with Him throughout His ministry and tradition says had been one of the primary caretakers for the disciples. She knew what it meant to be close to Jesus and to get one's life back because of the power of God as shown through our Lord. Mary knew. And it was because of her knowledge of Him and her faith in Him – I think – that she was the one appointed to go and be the first to tell the news, "He is risen, the Lord is risen indeed."

Christian counselor Dennis Linn tells a story of what the resurrection would have meant to Mary Magdalene that day. "Hilda" came to into Dennis Linn's office one day, crying because her son had tried to commit suicide and he was involved in drugs and prostitution and worse. She ended her list of her son's "big sins" with, "What bothers me most is that my son says he wants nothing to do with God. What will happen to him if he dies wanting nothing to do with God?"

Dennis Linn says that his own image of God had always been like his old Uncle George, strict and vengeful, all about punishment and consequences. So he thought, “God will probably send your son to hell.” But he didn't want to tell Hilda that so instead he asked, “What do you think?”

“Well,” she replied, “I think that when you die, you appear before the judgment seat of God. If you have lived a good life, God will send you to heaven. If you have lived a bad life, God will send you to hell.” Sadly, she concluded, “Since my son has lived such a bad life, if he were to die without repenting God would certainly send him to hell.”

Although Linn agreed with her, he didn't want to say so. So he used another strategy he'd learned in seminary: when you don't know how to solve a theological problem, let God do it. So he said to Hilda, “Close your eyes. Imagine that you are sitting next to the judgment seat of God. Imagine also that your son has died with all these serious sins and without repenting. Your son has just arrived at the judgment seat of God. Squeeze my hand when you can imagine that.”

After a few minutes, Hilda squeezed his hand. Then Linn asked, “Hilda, how does your son feel?” She answered, “My son feels so lonely and empty.” He asked Hilda what she would do. She said, “I want to throw my arms around my son.” And she lifted her arms and started to cry as she imagined herself holding her son tightly.

Finally, when she had stopped crying Linn asked her to look into God's eyes and watch what God wanted to do. And she saw God step down from the throne and embrace Hilda's son, just as she had done. And the three of them, Hilda, her son, and God, cried together and held one another.

You see, Mary Magdalene found that tomb empty because God loves us at least as much as the person who loves us the most. And God loves us just as we are: beat up, bedraggled, broken and bewildered. That tomb is empty because God wants to give us life beyond life, life where we hold one another in our arms – now and always.

The Risen Christ appeared to a woman whose reputation would be dragged through the mud for over 15 centuries, because God wanted HER – the one who had been forgiven so much – to deliver the message that God was waiting for us with outstretched arms. And Jesus told Mary Magdalene and the other disciples to love each other just as He had loved them. So when God is holding out God's arms to us, we should do the same for each other.

Love one another just as God loves us, because He is risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Amen.