

Christ Is All: An Easter Sermon

John 20:1-18

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Listen, I know as well as you do that in John's Gospel we do not know that the beloved disciple was John the Son of Zebedee. But tradition has had it so, and for this morning, the tradition will do.

I.

From the start there had been a race between them. Peter, the older fisherman had fished the lake so long he knew just where the schools of fish would hide, and at what season. All the young men wondered at the skill with which he would lower the net—just where he knew he could capture a mighty haul. No one could compete with him until this younger man, who had watched and watched and learned all Peter's tricks, outdid his teacher on one early morning. The younger man pulled out not just one net full but two. Peter congratulated him, but underneath his breath he said: "You upstart; I'll show you." And the younger man said to Peter, "I learned it all from you." But under his breath he muttered, "And now I've beaten you, old man. From now on, I'm the best."

And so it went. The two of them were noted for their skill and for their competition too. Sometimes Peter with his experience won the day, and sometimes the younger man with his ingenuity. But almost every day one or the other had the best catch on the lake. And the one who had the second best catch congratulated the winner, altogether unconvincingly.

Then when Jesus called them both to follow him and they gave up their boats to fish for people, even then the competition only grew more polite, not less intense. Now it was not for fish or profit that they competed but for the favor of the Lord they loved. Who could do more for him? Who could win his praise?

Even on that last evening when you would think that the time for all ambition was long gone, in quiet and polite ways, you could see John and Peter fight it out.

Jesus, with supper under way, got up and took a basin and a towel and set out to wash the disciples' feet. Peter, thinking he knew just what to say and eager to say it before John could say a word, protested loudly: "Lord, we are your servants, not your masters. You shall never wash my feet."

Jesus said, "Wrong answer, Peter. If you do not let me wash, you are no friend of mine."

Peter looked over at John. John was saying nothing, his sandals off, waiting rather smugly for Jesus to wash his feet. Peter thought: "John got it right by saying nothing, and I got it wrong by saying too much." Then Peter said aloud, "Not just my feet, Lord, but my head and hands."

Jesus smiled and said: "The feet will be enough."

Peter thought the smile especially friendly. Maybe John hadn't won after all.

Except that when they sat down to dinner, Jesus called John to sit beside him, just as close as flesh to bone. And Peter felt his jealousy grow strong, and John felt

not just love but pride. So Peter tried again. "I'm going to die," said Jesus. "I'll die with you," Peter said. "No sacrifice is too great for me."

Jesus looked right at Peter. "Tonight you will deny me three times," he said. Peter could not believe it. He looked down at the table. He did not want to look at Jesus or at the beloved disciple, either one.

Later when they arrested Jesus, Peter and John went after him, stealthily but steadily and watched as they took Jesus inside the high priest's house. "We're stuck out here," said Peter.

"I'm not," said John. He went to the door and knocked. A servant came. "I know the high priest," John said. "He'll let me in." The servant smiled and opened wide the door. Peter hurried forward, but the servant closed the door just as he got there. All Peter could see was John disappearing inside, shrugging his shoulders in pretend regret. "What could I do?" he seemed to say.

So there was Peter. Perhaps he was thinking of John winning once again, John inside. Peter, outside, outfoxed, outplayed, outrun. So when the high priest's servants asked him, "Do you know this Jesus?" three times Peter said, "I do not know him. I do not."

And now he was beyond competing, wrapped in shame, so that when morning came and they nailed Jesus to the cross, Peter stood far away, afraid, abashed. Peter stood far away and saw John standing there with Jesus' mother, heard Jesus say to him, "You be a son to my mother. Mother, you be a mother to John." And through his tears of shame and loss and jealousy, Peter thought, "Here, even at the end, John is the favorite. Even at the end."

Except, of course, what Peter could not know, or John, was that this was not the end. And Sunday Mary came to tell them: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him."

Then they ran, the two of them, racing as they had raced to catch the fish. Racing as they had raced to win Jesus' favor or to stand beside him at his trial. Racing beyond all reason toward some ultimate disaster or unimaginable triumph—racing toward an empty tomb.

And what is odd, as they told the story years later, what is odd is that somewhere in the middle of the race, the race just ended. John got there first, apparently. But after all these years of winning, he did not win. He stopped, stopped and stood aside, and let the older man enter first. And Peter, as he tells it, first at last, did not brag about being first at last but says: "Oh, yes, it's true. I was the first one in the tomb, but John was the first to believe." The first to know that what had happened was not the awful travesty of a stolen body but the awesome triumph of a risen Lord.

Even though it is true that later they slipped back a bit toward competition, it was only just a bit. Because at the moment when time stood absolutely still, at the door of the empty tomb, at that moment the race between them stopped, and the competition stopped, and the jealousy was done.

And for that moment, and through that moment for every moment yet to come, Christ was all and more than all.

II.

Now Mary Magdalene stood weeping after Peter and John had gone. Mary stood weeping, outside, the story says. Meaning of course she stood outside the empty

tomb, but perhaps meaning too that Mary had been outside all along, looking in on the inner circle but not quite part of it.

The gospel we read this morning says nothing of the rumors—that Mary was an outsider because she had lived the life of a harlot. Of the rumor that Jesus had cast out from Mary seven demons, that she had been mentally and spiritually disturbed. Of that our gospel today says nothing.

But Mary did stand outside, as those who are sinners or who feel like sinners often stand—outside. Looking at the signs of the faith, signs like an empty tomb, looking at them from afar. Looking at the inner circle of the faithful, looking at them from afar.

Mary stood as those disturbed in mind or spirit often stand, outside. Looking at the apparent clarity and serenity of the officially sane and wondering whether they will ever find acceptance there.

Whether Mary Magdalene had been a harlot or had been mentally disturbed, we do not know, but that she stood a little bit outside—that we know.

We do know of course that Mary Magdalene was a woman, and perhaps it is not coincidence that as a woman, she felt she had to stand a little bit outside. Not rush right into the center of the mystery like John and Peter. It came to pass that the church, which followed not too many years beyond, decided that John and Peter and other men could enter right into the center of the mystery. Be ordained, for instance, say the words that turned the bread and wine into body and blood. While women, like Mary, were supposed to stand at the very edge of the mystery, but not to enter in. To take the blessing second hand. Outside.

But we also know that only three days before, when all the men save only John had scattered or at least stood far away where no Roman soldier could spot them, then it was Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother and Mary the wife of Clopas who stood right there at the foot of the cross. In the time of need allowed, invited, right to the center.

But when the need was gone, and it was only bafflement or joy, when Jesus was beyond suffering or human help, it all returned to life as usual. "The tomb is empty," she tells them.

"Thank you very much for the information," say the very male voices. "Now we'll just go inside the tomb and see what's going on. That's it. Be a dear and stand back; see if you can get a glimpse through the door."

So she stands outside the central mystery—this possible harlot, this possible mental patient, this woman. She stands outside the central mystery, or so they think, until the central mystery comes right to her. "Woman," he says, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?"

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

Mary. The first to see. Mary. The first to hear.

Because even though it is true that the church later slipped back considerably, at that moment, when time stood absolutely still in the garden outside the empty tomb, at that moment, no one was outside and no one was inside. All were family. All were home.

And for that moment and through that moment for every moment yet to come,

Christ was all and more than all.

Beloved, hear the Easter message. You have been raised with Christ. Set your minds on what belongs to Christ, and not on old and earthly devices and desires.

Whatever race you race with proud ambition
Whatever prize you've won or hope to win,
Whatever loss you nurse like some condition
That festers underneath your jealous skin,
The gospel chides and cheers you with this warning:
Give up the race: obey a gentler call.
All competition ends on Easter morning.
From now on Christ is all and more than all.

However far you feel from human favor,
Cut off by guilt or by the sense you're odd
And different from your saner friends and neighbors,
And certainly unworthy of their God.
However you are hurt by false demeaning,
Easter breaks down each fence and every wall.
Inside and outside have no power or meaning.
From now on Christ is all, and more than all.

To Him be thanks and praise.