

Sunday April 9th, 2023

Easter

PRAYER: We go to the tomb with Mary Magdalene, early, while it is still dark. The stone is rolled away. We stoop with Peter to look on abandoned cloths, and we do not know what this all means. Now we stand with Mary weeping outside the grave. It is not an angel but your son we seek. O God; send him to us. Let us turn and see Jesus standing there. Make him no stranger to our eyes; let us see our teacher. Make us familiar to his eyes; let him see his disciples and call us each by name. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: Today we declare the victory of Christ. “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” Our gifts offered in the name of Christ are never offered in vain and by giving to Christ we declare our praise for his victory over death.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Lord, how you conquer! Not with birth in a palace, but with a bed in a manger! Not with a threat to end the world, but with a promise to begin a new age! Not with a mighty blow from your hand, but with a turn of your cheek! Not with an uprising against your enemies, but with the uplifting of your Son on a cross! Not with filling graves with rivals you have defeated, but by emptying the tomb of the Son you have defended!

O Lord, how you conquer! You sent someone we were not expecting, and we came to love him late. Our eyes had become accustomed to other masters. From the time we were small, we had been taught to defend ourselves; we were not ready to defend someone else. So, when you sent your Son, though we wanted to follow, we did not know how. He demanded change. We could not give it. So, we gave him up-to die.

We still do. Every day. Turning, hiding, fleeing, denying, we give you up to the world. We can be your disciples in the night while everyone sleeps. But when the sun rises, we closet our faith. We do not want to be different from everybody else, so you are crucified in our place.

Forgive us, Lord. Conquer us as only you can conquer. Love us into submission. Lead us to the empty tomb; let us know you are greater than the greatness of sin. Then lead us back to our homes, our schools and workplaces, that in the power of your forgiveness we may change. Not for our sake, but for yours. Not for our sake, but for theirs. We will set our spirits on the demands of heaven that we may send our hearts to the defense of earth.

We place the earth in the hands of the One who rolled away the stone. May you touch those who are empty and make them filled; may you touch those who are filled beyond measure and ease their burden. Touch your world through us, even as you did through Jesus Christ. We offer our lives to you for resurrection. Triumphant Victor, into your hands we commend our spirits!

BENEDICTION: Do not be afraid. Jesus has risen. You have seen the empty place where he lay. Go tell the world that Jesus is alive. Even now he is going before you into your streets and your homes, your offices and your markets, your prisons, and your hospitals. Look and you will see him. Amen.

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John 20:1-18

“Where is Jesus”

A few years ago, Laura, Joshua, Rachel and I took our last family trip with just the four of us to Universal studios in Florida. It was great fun, although I did manage to get nauseous on the Harry Potter ride. At Universal Studios there was a restaurant called Bubba’s Shrimp House. The name comes from the famous movie “Forest Gump” when Forest meets Bubba who regales him with shrimp recipes.

In the restaurant in Florida, they had a young woman who was going about giving out prizes to people who could answer trivia questions about the movie. Little did she realize that “Forest Gump” is Joshua’s favourite movie, and he can quote many lines from it. The young lady dropped a question on us that seemed difficult to answer, but without missing a heartbeat Joshua gave the correct answer and won a prize.

I understand why Joshua likes this movie so much. There is a great deal to commend it to us. Themes of love, loyalty, and watching Gump go from one incredible adventure to another. Many of us can quote at least one line from the film such as “Momma says, ‘Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you are going to get.’” I should have had Joshua here today to imitate Gump, which he does often.

There is a funny part of the Oscar winning film where Gump, upset about his beloved Jenny leaving him again, sets off running. He runs across the county, the state, and eventually across the country. He sleeps when he is tired, eats when he is hungry, but generally he just runs. Over time people get interested in him, and why he is running. As he reaches the coast, he turns around and crosses the country again.

People ask him why he is running, and he doesn’t really know, other than he likes to run. On about his fourth crossing of the country, followed by quite a crowd, he suddenly stops. When asked why, he simply states, “I am tired.” Then without a second thought he makes his way home. So, what was the point of his running? The reality was there wasn’t any point at all, other than it helped him cope with his grief over losing Jenny.

Have you ever noticed how much running there is in this Gospel lesson before us today in the midst of grief? It is an exhausting text to read. Everybody in this passage is running somewhere. It is an odd thing, because there is very little running anywhere in the bible, but here it is everywhere. Why on earth is everybody running around? And why on earth is everybody running around in the most unlikely of places; a cemetery?

Now I have been in a few cemeteries; in fact, I worked in one for a whole summer, and except for a jogger on occasion, I have rarely seen anyone running in a cemetery. In cemeteries we walk: quietly, slowly, and often with some apprehension. But in this text, everybody is running among the tombs. Running is not a foreign concept to us. I see people running, just about every morning, in their jogging suits and with their iPods.

Most of the time they don’t look too happy, but they run anyway.

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I have seen people run around offices like their pants are on fire; I think they must be very busy, or trying to look busy. I have seen at Pearson Airport, people trying to make connections running from gate 1 to gate 60 it seems, and trying to be faster than Donavan Bailey. I have seen parents running from work, to schools, to soccer practice, and then maybe to some church event. Like with Forest Gump, I wonder, why do they run?

I am not sure most of those I see running even know why they do it, but it seems imperative that they pick up their heels, and make tracks. The one thing I don't see happening very much is people running for the sheer joy of it. No one seems to enjoy the speed they must expend to get to what is most important. We have an expression, "Chasing the White Rabbit", from the book *Alice in Wonderland*.

It refers to the white rabbit who was constantly consulting his watch, all the while shouting, "I am late, so very late." Alice wonders, "Late for what", and she follows him down the rabbit hole. "Chasing the White Rabbit" means we are chasing something without even knowing why. And again, it seems nobody enjoys the running they do, even if they believe it is important.

That is except children. If you take a group of children, and turn them loose, they will run. Not because they are being chased, although they often giggle with glee when you do offer the chase. They enjoy running not because they are over committed, or because they are trying to get their heart rate up or their waistline down. They run because it is fun to run. They feel empowered somehow, the faster they go.

It is that childlike spirit of running that seems to pervade the Easter story. The running we read about has a light-footed feel about it. Feet that were wounded and scarred by all kinds of experiences in life, are suddenly set free and running. We may have trouble appreciating just what was happening here, but three individuals got their feet moving, and their hearts racing for joy and hope and faith.

Consider, if you will, how monumental a shift occurred in the hearts of those in our Gospel lesson today. Mary, who had witnessed firsthand the horror of the crucifixion, is wrought with crushing grief. I am sure her mind and heart were flooded with, questions about why this happened to someone that she loved, and someone who was clearly non-threatening to everyone.

How could such a miscarriage of justice be carried out on someone who was clearly in touch with God. Someone who could perform miracles like exorcisms, healings, and even raising people from the dead. Mary Magdalene was believed to be someone Jesus delivered from demons, and she adored Jesus. Her world would have been turned upside down by the crucifixion.

So, she comes, early in the morning to the tomb. She is not running at this point. After all, the dead aren't going anywhere. She comes to pay her respects, to grieve, and to remember. But upon arrival she sees that the tomb is empty and her pace quickens as she runs to report this to the disciples.

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Peter and John join the race, running back to the tomb, not sure what has happened. "Where is Jesus?" Looking into the empty tomb, Peter couldn't make sense of it; John is said to have believed. Later, Mary encounters the risen Jesus, and she runs and declares "I have seen the Lord!"

What makes you run? What gets your feet moving fast? Does joy feed your need for speed, or does obligation? This world seems to be getting faster and faster. We were promised that as technology advanced, and society developed, we would have more leisure and more time to enjoy life, but it seems it is just getting worse. Forty-hour weeks are now fifty or more. We have fewer children, but we seem to be expending enough energy to care for ten little ones.

We have blackberries, cell phones, portable computers, and we still complain we haven't enough time and we are exhausted. Let us be honest, we are running, but we are not moving with much joy. Let me suggest for your consideration that we make a serious effort to examine our reason for running through life. Why do we work, play, and socialize at break neck speed? Can it be that we think the more we do, the more value our lives have?

It is a serious danger to our souls to fall into the trap of thinking that our worth, our purpose, maybe even our salvation, are somehow tied to being busy. Consider how fearful we are that people find out that we are not busy at all. In several companies and businesses there are people who are basically doing what we call, "busy work". Trying to look indispensable, so they will not be seen as redundant and laid off.

Could it be that we have come to hope more in our own abilities, and the capturing of more opportunities, than we do in the hope that made Peter, John and Mary run through a cemetery? I am mindful of a story, about a woman who was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles, looking for a gift that had sold out the day before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when the elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!" A few others nodded their heads and grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't worry. They already crucified him."

Where is the joy in our hasty pursuits? Can it be that we are like Mary, so overcome by the distractions, and the pain of life, that we cannot even recognize our Lord standing right in front of us? Can it be, that we are so frightened, to stop our hectic pace, that we fail to pause and see the wonder of life?

Wherein lies your hope? Is it in something your hands have created, your car drove you to, or your television entertained you with? How fast do we have to run through life before it has any significant meaning?

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Maybe we are running through a cemetery. Running among monuments to failed human achievements. Running among, or from buried dreams and dashed hopes. Maybe we are running so hard through life, because we hope somehow to catch the sacred. Catch that one thing, or that one person that means so much more than we currently possess. Let me say that again. “Maybe we are running so hard through life, because we hope to somehow catch the sacred or eternal.”

Today, of all days, is the day when the world must stop its hasty race to nothing, and start to quicken its pace to the one source of hope that we all can cling to. Easter is a day to remember, and celebrate that the powers of this world: be they political, religious, economic, social, or psychological, do not have the last say. That even in the very place, a cemetery, that screams of despair and loss, there is reason to run for joy.

How long has it been since we felt breathless in trying to tell the world, “I have seen the Lord!” It was in 1912 that Music publisher Dr. Adam Geibel asked C. Austin Miles to write a hymn that would be “sympathetic in tone, breathing tenderness in every line; one that would bring hope to the hopeless, rest for the weary, and downy pillows to dying beds.”

Does that not sound like what our busy lives and busy hearts seem to be crying out for? Hope for the hopeless and rest for the weary. C. Austin Miles, clearly inspired by God from his reading of John 20, this passage before us today, composed a hymn that is probably only second in popularity to “The Old Rugged Cross.” And although to our modern sensibilities there is some difficulties with these words, the point is still valid.

In thinking of Mary’s two trips to the garden tomb on the first Easter day he composed the following, *I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses. And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known.*

He speaks, and the sound of His voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing; and the melody that He gave to me within my heart is ringing. And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.

I’d stay in the garden with Him though the night around me is falling; but he bids me go through the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling. And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known. (Kenneth W. Osbeck, 101 Hymn Stories, pg. 123-125)

Maybe before we run any further, we need to stop and listen to the voice calling out for us. Maybe before we run with joy, we need to be transformed by the hope that cannot fail; a hope born out of Christ’s resurrection, and discovered by those who dared to run toward it. So, are you running toward the hope or are you chasing white rabbits? Easter offers you the choice. Come, Christ is ready, willing and more than able to “walk with you, talk with you and tell you, you are his own.”