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Bridge Street United Church  
March 31, 2024  
Readings: I Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

### God So Loved the World

We all know this story, the Easter story. We may put together in our mind as one story the accounts found in the four gospels, each gospel account a little different from the others, or we may keep them separate. Either way, we know the overall story. Yet for all our knowledge of it, there are still things to be said, perhaps things we know, but things worth saying anyway as we gather this morning.

I am going to concentrate on the version of the story from John's Gospel. In John's account, all the characters who come to the tomb come as I think you and I would have come. They come with every expectation that they will find a dead body there. Mary Magdalene comes while it is still dark, and that is what she expects to find. When she goes to tell the disciples, Peter and one whom Jesus loved, about the empty tomb, her words reveal that that is what she expected: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." The two disciples also do not show much understanding. While the disciple whom Jesus loved saw that the tomb was empty and, according to John's Gospel, believed, the two of them still went back home after looking in the tomb. The linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that would have covered Jesus' head lying elsewhere in the empty tomb, did not make a sufficient impression on them to raise serious questions, let alone to have a sense that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They "returned to their homes," the text tells us. What could they do

about a missing body, troubling as that development was? Perhaps a little more sleep would give them ideas as to what they might do next.

And Mary, whom we now find back at the tomb, still does not have any notion that Jesus is anything but dead. So when she returns to the tomb and see the two angels and they ask her why she is weeping, she says almost the same thing she said when she ran to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she first meets Jesus, and assumes he is the gardener, and he asks for whom she is looking, she again makes clear she is looking for Jesus’ dead body: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

It is only when Jesus then says her name, “Mary,” that she recognizes him. Why would she have recognized him before? She was a realist—as we are. She had been at the foot of the cross with his mother. She knew he was dead. People who have been crucified do not return to life.

But the story of Easter is that in Jesus of Nazareth God did overcome death. Death would not have the final word. That said, there are some points in this story upon which it would be good to concentrate. We do not know, for example, the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body, for this was not a resuscitation of a corpse but a resurrection. We know that Mary did not recognize Jesus until he spoke. Yet it is a very human Jesus who appears to them. He comes, later in John’s Gospel, as a figure on the shore, inviting the disciples, then out fishing, to come and join him for breakfast. In Luke’s Gospel, he is a stranger invited to stay for dinner. If it is a resurrected body that could pass through locked doors, as Jesus also did on that first Easter evening when he appeared to his disciples, it is also a human body that could be touched and on which the nail marks and the wound left on a sword-pierced side could be seen. Because Mary and his disciples

had the same expectations we would—when you are dead, you are dead—their reaction makes clear that the Jesus who met them after the resurrection was the figure they had known, “a much revered, much beloved and very mortal man” as the American novelist, Marilynne Robinson, put it in a reflection she wrote some years ago on this passage from John’s Gospel.

In that reflection, Robinson states that the resurrection story helps to make clear two points critical for the writer of John’s Gospel, and they are two things we need to hear today and to carry with us into the days that lie ahead. The first is that the God who came to us in Jesus of Nazareth created this world and all that is in it and the second is that this same God loves the world and everything God has made. “For God so loved the world” is a famous line from earlier in John’s Gospel, but it is a profound message central to all the Gospels, and it is a message central to Easter.

What stands at the centre of the Biblical message, the Christian message, is the idea that God loved the world so much in Jesus of Nazareth God took on human flesh, lived among us, and died for us. The “died for us” is not, in John’s Gospel (or in the other gospels, for that matter) an emphasis of Jesus’ death being a substitute for our sins, though we can find that concept elsewhere in Scripture. Rather, in John’s Gospel and in the other gospels, Jesus assuming human flesh, living among us, and dying for us is about God’s love for this whole created world, including each of us. When you just sit back and think for a moment about that central Christian claim—that God so loved the world God took on human flesh to live and die as one of us—it is a remarkable claim.

But it is also a claim that can give us life in the here and now. In saying that, I do not want in any way to deny what I think God’s love means for us beyond the grave. Regarding the point of what lies beyond the grave for each of us, I plan to look at that subject in next week’s

sermon, with some reflection on what Paul says on that subject in the remainder of chapter 15, a portion of the chapter beyond the point where Vicki stopped reading today. By way of a trailer for next week's sermon, let me say that I agree with the way Paul uses the analogy of the seed and the plant as a way of stating how God's love for us continues beyond death, and that we have an existence in God's keeping the other side of death which is different from what we know now (even as a plant looks so very different from the seed with which it began life).

But it is the here and now, our world, about which I want to speak this morning. This passage is a reminder that God so loved the world—our world, the world we now inhabit, Belleville and its environs, this congregation, each one of us. It is not, of course, that God loves only the Belleville area, only this congregation, only each one of us—but God does love each one of us. I think of this because I know also that recent years have been trying one for this congregation: like every other congregation, we have experienced Covid and the inability to meet for a lengthy period of time; a lengthy intentional interim ministry that made us feel as though everything was on hold for five years, a very large number of deaths in this congregation during the past four years have left very few of us untouched and many of us here deeply touched, the criticisms from outside and the frustrations we have sometimes experienced ourselves from the outreach the Drop-In has represented, even as we know how important that Drop-In is for so many in this city; an increasingly secular society that leads fewer people to choose to belong to any church, including this one. It is in such circumstances—life's trying circumstances, not just life's good ones—that we need to hear again those words—“for God so loved the world”—and to know that they are directed **also** to us.

I noted in the beginning of this sermon that all the characters come, as we ourselves would have come. They are realists. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with being a realist.

But there is one other thing about this story I want to note this morning, something I think can be helpful to us as we gather here now. I noted earlier that when Mary Magdalene comes back to the garden and meets Jesus, she does not recognize him. She does not even recognize him when he initially speaks to her. When is it that she recognizes him? When he calls her by name. I noted a few moments ago that God so loved the world, and, while acknowledging that God loves each of us as individuals, I talked then about God's love for the collective—the congregation, our city and the surrounding area. But God also loves each of us, as individuals. And sometimes we need to hear that for ourselves, as individuals.

I hope that this church, and this service, can be a place and a time when we, too, hear God call us by name, feel God's presence in our being. Whether it is through the hymns we sing, be they familiar or ones new to us; whether in the setting of this building, either here at Bridge Street or at St. Matthew's; whether in the familiar faces we see or new folks with whom we have begun to become acquainted—my hope is that in this time and place—not just here, but also here—in this time and place, we, like Mary, might hear God call us by name, feel God's love for us as real and as personal as Mary Magdalene did that day.

We do indeed gather as those who believe that God loves us, that God cares for us, and that God calls us to serve faithfully. God does not demand success of us. God does not demand that we somehow fill this building on Sunday. But what God does ask of us is to be faithful, that we share with neighbours, with family members, and with friends, when the opportunity is there, why our faith is important, why we gather here, week by week, why what we believe leads us to act in particular ways. It is to such a witness that we are called, as individuals and as a congregation, by that God who loves us, each and every one, and who loves our world. It is that God who greets us on this day when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. May we be strengthened

this day for the days that lie ahead, with all that they bring. And to that God, who made us, whose love is known to us in the risen Christ, and who continues to be present to us through the Holy Spirit, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Marilynne Robinson, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, April 4, 2012, p. 22.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.