



April 16, 2006

Preaching: Ronnie Sue Verboom

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

“Easter”

Friends, this morning we remember the story of the first Easter. We remember the women who had loved Jesus. We remember how they wept and watched his long climb to Golgotha. We remember their anguish as he died on the cross. We remember their tears as his body was taken down and laid in a tomb. We remember their despair at being unable to properly care for his body, since night had fallen, and such actions were forbidden on Sabbath. From Friday night, when Jesus died, through Saturday, they waited.

Finally, early Sunday morning, they could go and finish those tasks. The reading from John’s gospel focuses on one of those women: Mary Magdalene. Her story is one of desperate weeping and seeking.

It’s the story of a grieving woman, longing to carry out a last act of faithfulness in anointing the body of a dear friend and teacher: one who had brought her healing; one who had stirred her spirit as no one ever before. It’s the story of her horror as she discovered the body missing, of her hopeless, racked sobbing, of her chasing from the tomb to the disciples and back to the tomb again, frantic, looking for the body of Jesus.

After prayer and reflection, I began to see how this story is descriptive and symbolic of life. We, like Mary, have experienced times of weeping and seeking—sometimes literally, sometimes deep within secret corners of our hearts.

As a parent of four adult children, I journeyed with them through the early years of their lives. Through THEIR experiences I relived some of my own. Growing up years are full of weeping and seeking. We seek FRIENDS- and oh, what an important quest that is! We seek acceptance, accomplishment- in academics or art, music or sports. We seek many things. And we don't always find what we seek. We shed bitter tears, hot with hurt, rage and fury. We cry ourselves to sleep. We may find some comfort in a mother's or father's embrace- but it doesn't take all the hurt or need away. Childhood is a time of weeping and seeking.

Early adult years are, too. We may focus on the search for a life companion. We seek friendship, connection. We seek meaningful work that provides for our needs and gives us independence. We seek the joy of knowing we are good at some things. We try to be a good mentor and model for younger friends and family members. We seek--- and we don't always find what we are looking for. The road is rocky, with many twists and turns. We may cry real tears, or carry unshed tears deep within. Ours is a story of weeping and seeking.

Middle and later adult years find us seeking meaning in our lives. Things we sought desperately when younger are either never found, or don't turn out as we expected. People we care about grow up, change, move away. They become ill and die. Our work and daily activity may seem dull and routine, or even empty. We seek meaning--- a way to make sense of it all. Like Mary Magdalene, our stories tell of weeping and seeking.

I wonder, as we come to church this Easter morning, if we don't even come HERE much as Mary went to the tomb that first Easter morning long ago. We may, in truth, come expecting what the world promises to us: you live and then you die. That's it.

Even though we have heard the Easter Resurrection story many times, even though we have sung of God's life-giving power, even though we've been told God raised Jesus and promises to raise us----- we may have been so discouraged by life's challenges that it seems too good to be true. Pain and disappointment have taught us to be dubious. All our years of weeping and seeking tell us: *Don't be naïve*. If we do permit ourselves to hope, it is only a hope for that mysterious someday when we die and God takes us to a new life in heaven.

Friends, there's a reason why Jesus told us we must be like little children if we want to enter his kingdom. Let me share a poem, written by Paul Willis, telling of his little girl, Hanna's, wisdom:

*We are on our way home from Good Friday service.
It is dark. It is silent.
“Sunday,” says Hanna, “Jesus will be rosing from the dead.”*

*It must have been like that.
A white blossom, or maybe a red one,
Pulsing from the floor of the tomb,
Reaching around the Easter stone
And levering it aside with pliant thorns.
The soldiers overcome with the fragrance,
And Mary at sunrise
Mistaking the dawndewed
Rose of Sharon
For the untameable Gardener.*

Children, though they, too, taste the tears of weeping and feel the weariness that comes with seeking—young children can still smell the roses. In the dark of Good Friday they remember the “rosing”.

Because in spite of our doubts and denials, Christ is alive. This story of Mary from the village of Magdala tells us that. It also tells us several other interesting things.

This story tells us that Christ’s presence is easily overlooked. It’s as if our weeping has clouded our vision. It’s as if we are exhausted and drained to the point of being numb, half-asleep. Mary took Jesus to be the gardener. She looked directly at him, but didn’t know him. In his presence, as he stood at her elbow, she told two angels that he had been snatched away.

This Easter story assures us: INTO OUR LIVES OF WEEPING AND SEEKING CHRIST DOES, CHRIST WILL APPEAR. But he’s not always recognizable to us. When we do recognize him, we are surprised. God’s love, goodness and undefeated, eternal life have sneaked up on us. Christ is like a rose growing in a tomb, tender yet strong, pushing away the stone of death and decay. Christ is the Rose of Hope.

The desperation in our lives may be a result of our mad scramble, hither and yon, when what we long for stands patiently waiting beside us. Christ is alive, and waits for us to see him. But maybe it has to be this way. Maybe it’s only when our defenses are down that we can receive the grace God offers.

Christ is here, in YOUR tangled garden of life and death. He is here to offer us what we seek: the message of our inexpressible worth. He is here to soothe the hot

tears in our eyes and hearts. “Why are you weeping,” he asks. Turn and see. Christ is waiting. Take his hand.

Christ is the Rose of Hope. He is right here and everywhere in the ordinary world of our every day. We have hope, my friends, because on Easter, DEATH DIED.

This means that when our lives here end, we will still live, in the mystery of God’s new world.

But it also means that there is NO LOSS, NO PAIN, NO DISAPPOINTMENT, NO HUMILIATION, NO SORROW that can withstand God’s power—even in THIS world.

As Jesus told Mary not to cling to him, but to go and tell others what she had seen, Christ needs US to represent him in this world.

To represent him, we will help bring alive the truth of Easter. Live as one who knows Death Has Died. People will see that hope in our lives. We will turn to God expecting that each little death we face: divorce, illness, injury, rejection, loss of a loved one—each will be overcome by life. Life will win—over and over and over again. When life overcomes death, we will talk about it. We will witness to it. And the world will be changed. As Christ lives in us, we are, even now, *Rising from the Dead*- visibly in THIS world of our every day.

We have hope, you see, because God is reclaiming power over the world in the Resurrection, not just “beaming” us up out of it.

God could have “beamed” Mary up. He could have “beamed” all the disciples up. He could have “beamed” Jesus’ mother and family members up. He didn’t. He acted THROUGH them, so that WE here today would receive his message. That’s his plan for us, too- to be bearers of his Resurrection power.

Friends, weep when you are overcome with sorrow. Seek the meaning and beauty in life. Know that Christ is near. He will taste the salt of your tears and wipe them from your eyes. He will fill your life with meaning and beauty. He is the Rose of Hope. Can you smell its sweetness? Share the Easter good news of God’s promise: through him we are, right now, this very moment, *Rising from the Dead*.