

The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown  
Sermon Preached  
on  
April 11, 2010  
Easter Sunday  
by  
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**Whom Are You Looking For?**

Acts 10:  
John 20:1-18

Father Kelly walks into a bar and says to the first man he meets, "Do you want to go to heaven?" The man said, "I do, Father." The priest said, "Then stand over there against the wall." Then the priest asked the second man, "Do you want to go to heaven?" "Certainly, Father," was the man's reply. " Then stand over there against the wall," said the priest. Then Father Kelly walked up to O'Brien and said, "Do you want to go to heaven?" Surprisingly O'Brien said, "No, I don't Father." The priest said, "I don't believe this. You mean to tell me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?" O'Brien said, "Oh, when I die, yes. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."

Do you want to go to heaven? It's a good question for us to consider. In fact, we have been considering a variety of questions each Sunday of Lent, questions asked by Jesus. We started with "What are you looking for?" and then we heard "Who do you say that He is?" The next two weeks Jesus asked the challenging questions, "Why do you worry?" and "Why are you afraid?" Then last week Jesus' question was, "Will you lay down your life for me?"

On this Easter Sunday we have another question to consider as Jesus asks Mary and asks us, "Whom are you looking for?" Strange question as it is not grammatically correct. Not only does it end in a preposition but it incorrectly uses the word "whom." Blame it on the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, for that is how the question is phrased in our lesson for this morning that Don read of the gospel writer John's account of Easter morning.

Our worship here on Friday night provided the backdrop for this morning's gospel lesson, through a hauntingly beautiful Tenebrae service. The service ended in almost complete darkness with a single voice singing the question, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Then we were reminded of Jesus' final words as he hung on the cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." And he took his last breath. The single light in the sanctuary, the Christ candle which sat on the communion table was snuffed out and our service ended as we sat in a totally darkened sanctuary.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Imagine being there, among Jesus disciples, his friends and followers, watching your friend being beaten and mocked, tortured and killed.

Imagine being part of a small group of discouraged, depressed, frightened friends of Jesus, who after witnessing this cruel death, are huddled together behind a locked door somewhere in Jerusalem. To put it mildly, you and your friends are crushed. For three years you had given your life to an idea that was just shown to be powerless. You had allowed yourself to be convinced that love is better than hate, forgiveness better than revenge, that giving is better than getting, that life is more powerful than death, and it all had crumbled, as this one you had trusted and followed was arrested, tried, and put to death. What was to become of you and your friends now?

And so our story begins as one of those friends, those fellow followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, got up early the morning after the Sabbath and decides to go to the garden where Jesus had been buried on Friday afternoon. She couldn't believe what she finds, as she discovers that the stone has been removed. So she runs back to you and the others to report what she has seen. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb.” This is the only logical conclusion, for what else could have happened. “Are you sure Mary,” you and the others wonder. So Peter and John, the leaders of your group, leap into action and race to the tomb.

I love this image. These two men literally racing. Listen to what the passage tells us: Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. It reminds me of a story about two nuns who were running away from a bear. The bear is getting closer and closer to them and one nun says to the other, “Do you think we'll be able to outrun him, Sister?” “I don't have to outrun him, Sister,” the other nun replied. “I only have to outrun you.”

Back to our story. So now we have Peter and John, and Mary who finally catches up to the two racing men, all back at the tomb. No one is thinking about resurrection. Come on, they aren't that gullible to believe Jesus came back to life. They, like you, are realists. They know the ultimate power of death.

The men check out the tomb and indeed Mary is correct. The body is gone. And they turn and go back home, where they will report to you and the others what they had seen. The body is gone and all that is left in the tomb are the linen wrappings that had at one time covered the dead body of Jesus.

Now Mary does not return with the two disciples, but remains by the tomb to be alone to weep. Who would do this? Who would steal the body of her dead friend? Still she is not believing that he has risen. The only possible explanation for the

disappearance of the body is some graverobber has come.

As she stands by the tomb crying, through her tears she sees two angels in the tomb and they ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She no sooner says this when a man appears, the gardener, she assumes. He too asks why she is crying and also asks, "Whom are you looking for?" Might he be the one responsible for the body of Jesus being missing? So she asks, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him." And the man calls her by name. "Mary." And in that intimate moment, she knows. She recognizes this man to be Jesus. He is alive! This is incredible. She, nor you, or any of the others ever imagined or hoped for a resurrection. It is only when it gets personal, when Mary hears her own name, that she gets it, that she truly understands that no one stole his body, but he is alive. Standing there by that empty tomb which had once held the dead body of her friend and teacher, she was as surprised by God as you or I would be under the circumstances.

The Easter question for Mary and for us this day is "Whom are you looking for?" Clearly, Mary as were the other disciples, were looking for a dead body of their friend Jesus. They were not looking for a risen Lord. What about us? What about you? As you came to church this morning, this Easter morning, whom are you looking for?

In many ways, we are like those first disciples who were gathered behind locked doors in Jerusalem and who came to the tomb that day. They had heard Jesus teach, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will never die." . . . They had also heard him say, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I died and behold I am alive forever more; and because I live, you will live also."

Nevertheless, on that morning when they came to the grave, they came expecting death. And I am suspicious that you and I are like those disciples. Even though we have heard the promises of God, we too have our doubts about a risen Jesus, about this resurrection thing.

Easter means a lot of things to a lot of people. There is a group called Mission Media which produced a series of video clips in which they did some "person on the street" interviews asking religious questions. One of the questions was, "What is the meaning of Easter." The answers went from, "Easter is Jesus' birthday," to, "Easter is the day he died on the cross." to "Easter is the first day of spring."

Of course, Easter is none of those things, but it is a celebration of the central reality of the Christian faith. This is the day that we rejoice in the fact that Christ is risen! Death could not hold him in the grave. We love and worship and serve a living Lord! Jesus defeated the power of death for him and for us. That is the Easter message!

Does this mean there is no more death? Obviously not. Death is undeniable and inevitable. What the resurrection means is that death does not have the ultimate power.

A little boy was attending his first funeral. His experience with his great-aunt Gladys had not been particularly pleasant. She was grouchy, not very happy, not fond of children in general. At the funeral he leaned over to his mother and in a nervous voice heard for several pews in either direction asked, "Where is she now?" His mother replied, "Aunt Gladys has gone to be with God." The little boy thought about that for a moment, rolled his eyes heavenward and announced, "Poor God."

Death is not funny, but death does not have to be frightening either. The Easter message is that death does not have the final word about us. God does. And it is a word of everlasting love and strength and victory.

Whom did you come looking for? Did you come today to hear the story about a Galilean man who lived more than 2,000 years ago? A story that tells an incredible tale about how his followers came and found an empty grave. Did you come simply to hear that story or did you come to looking for more? Did you come looking for the one who is truly alive, who conquered death that for a short time held him a tomb?

Shirley Guthrie, a former professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, writes: "If it could be said that the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls with any one claim, the claim that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead is that claim. Without faith in a risen and living Christ there would be no Christianity. It was not Jesus' ethical teachings and example or his noble death that gave birth to the Christian Church and made it spread; it was the news of his resurrection. We have seen that it was only because they first believed in a risen Christ that the first Christians looked back to ask about the meaning of his birth, life and death. . . . The earliest Christian confession summarizing everything the first Christians believed was 'Jesus is Lord,' a title conferred on him because of his resurrection."

Easter is not a nice ending to the story of Jesus, but it is the beginning of our story. A story in which our faith can triumph over death. When we think about Easter and the significance of the resurrection, we need to remember that Easter is not only about Jesus; it is about us. It is about what is possible for us if we will come looking for and believing in a risen Lord.

Whom are you looking for? If it was for a dead Jesus, the remains of one for whom there are simply stories, you will not find him here. For he is risen! He is alive! It is because of that fact . . . because of what God did on that Easter . . . that this church stands here today . . . that we are able to be here today. For if the resurrection had not actually happened the disciples would never have gone on and there would not be a Christian Church. They would never have had the courage, the

audacity or the nerve to say another word about Jesus in public, let alone to claim that He rose and is Lord of the living.

In our Easter gospel story from John, Jesus told Mary to go and tell the others that she had seen him. She was to share with them the good news that he is not dead. That same command is given to us. We are to share the good news of our living Lord with others by letting our faith shine through in the living of our lives.

If we know joy because of the Easter story of the resurrection, then we should share joy. If we know hope because of the Easter story of the resurrection, we should bring hope to others. If we know forgiveness and love because of the Easter story of the resurrection, then we should forgive and love others.

This is what we try to do here at The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, as a congregation, through our many ministries and our mission outreach, through our work with children and youth, through our classes and programs of Christian education, through our ministries of care and compassion, through our partnerships with numerous organizations and agencies working on behalf of others, through our commitment to justice. This is what we proclaim through words of scripture, proclamation, prayer and music each week in worship.

Whom are you looking for? Are you looking for a risen Jesus who is here with us now or are you looking for the story about this Jesus. Are you looking for one with whom you can be touched personally or are you looking for one about whom others speak?

As for me, I have come here today looking for a risen Jesus. I believe he rose from the dead. Why? Because, like Mary, I have experienced the risen living Lord in my life. I have heard him call my name, as did Mary, and I have felt his love and concern for me.

In this morning's reading from the Acts, Peter, eloquently preaches a message about a risen Jesus Christ. He preaches it because he believes it and he believes it because he has experienced it!

I dare to stand in this pulpit on a Sunday, especially this Sunday, because I have experienced the resurrected Christ in my life. I don't have some incredible moment to describe to you such as when Paul encountered the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus. I can't tell you I touched Christ as did Thomas who, in order to believe, had to touch the same hands of the Risen Christ which had been nailed to the cross. No, I haven't touched him, but I can tell you the Risen Christ has touched me!

I can tell you, that as corny as it might sound, as incredulous as my confidence might seem, the Risen Christ is very much a part of my life. Things continually happen in my life that once again remind me that Christ is very present and things

happen in the lives of those around me that confirm the evidence of Christ, alive and well, working in and through people.

It is difficult for me to describe exactly how I experience the Risen Christ, I can just proclaim to you that I do experience him! And because I do I want you to have the same experience. I want for you to believe in the resurrection because it can make a difference in your life. It can transform you!

Whom are you looking for? If you are looking for a risen Lord then you came to the right place. I encourage you to look around you and see how Christ is very much alive in this world of ours in spite of the evil that takes place.

When we began this Lenten journey just a few weeks ago our question was "What are you looking for?" It is not very different from this morning's question of "Whom are you looking for?" At that time I asked you to imagine sitting here this morning and coming face to face with Jesus and having him look at you and ask, "What are you looking for?" or "Whom are you looking for?" I told you then that these are the questions asked of us each week when we come here. For when we hear the scriptures we need to understand that we are coming face to face with Jesus just as Mary did outside that empty tomb. The problem is, that like Mary, we may not recognize him as we may not really be looking for a risen Jesus.

My friends, I can tell you with great assurance that a risen living Jesus is beside you right now. He wants nothing more than for you to feel him and hear him saying your name. Listen, can you hear him? . . . . . He wants for you to trust him and believe the promises that he has made for you. He wants for you not to worry or be afraid. He wants for you to go and tell others and share his love and to be willing to lay down your life for him.

Whom are you looking for? I hope and pray it is for the one who has the power to overcome death . . . the one who comes with a message of hope, a promise of life, and a command to: Go and tell! Go and serve! Go and live!

I hope and pray you are looking for and find the one I know and experience . . . a Jesus Christ who is very much alive and walking beside you every step of the way.

He is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

Thanks be to God. Amen.