

## **The Gift of Presence**

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

April 16, 2017

*Easter Sunrise*

John 20:1-18



Here we are on the first day of the week waking up in the dark just as John's gospel begins, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark." This is the only resurrection story that begins in the dark. The others say "as it was dawning", "when the sun had risen", and "at early dawn." This is important, as the language of light and dark is abundant throughout John's gospel. As Mary approached the tomb in the darkness, the world felt very dark. On that early morning, no one understood what was happening, not even the disciples and those closest to Jesus. They were all in the dark.

Unlike those of us who awake on Easter with the knowledge of the empty tomb and the joy of the resurrection, they awoke in the dark, full of the emotions that consumed us on Good Friday. They awoke in sadness and confusion completely unaware of what the morning would bring.

In John's gospel, Mary comes to the garden alone and finds the stone has been removed from the tomb. She assumes someone has taken Jesus and the strange series of events begin. Can you picture Mary running in the dark to share the news with Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved? She arrives out of breath and says "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Were the disciples even able to understand her the first time or did they ask her to catch her breath and repeat herself? Either way, Peter and the other disciple set out running to the tomb. The other disciple arrives first but doesn't go in. Maybe he is scared or maybe it is out of respect for Peter, but he only bends down to look and sees the linen wrappings lying in the tomb.

Then Peter arrives and someone finally enters the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings and also sees the cloth that had been on Jesus' head isn't lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. We have no insight into how Peter reacts to the empty tomb, but when the other disciple enters, we are told he sees and believes. But

John also adds, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead” which is his way of saying they are still in the dark.

Then the disciples simply return to their homes. Why would Peter and the other disciple who had been so faithful to Jesus experience the empty tomb and just return to their home? When I first read the text, it perplexed me that Peter and the other disciple seem so unaffected. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t stay longer, but then recognized they must have been afraid to show any emotion or draw attention to themselves for fear of being recognized as a follower of Jesus. So they choose to take the safe road and return home. This is certainly not the road they have been traveling with Jesus. When Jesus was alive, they often found themselves constantly out of their comfort zone, telling all who would listen about Jesus and experiencing countless miracles. Now Jesus is barely gone, and they are already reverting to their old ways.

Then, just when it feels like the story is over, we learn Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. She could easily have left like Peter and the other disciple but stays. She could have run home, just like she ran to tell the disciples about the tomb. Running must have seemed like the easier thing to do in that moment, but she stays. Instead of weeping in the privacy of her own home, she stays and allows herself to be vulnerable and pour out her emotions right there in the garden. Mary doesn’t choose the safe path like the disciples. She chooses to stay, but why?

Based on her responses she is focused on finding Jesus’ body, but I think it is more than that. I think what Mary is really yearning for is the relationship with Jesus not just his body. She only knows Jesus as human so she is focused on finding his body. Mary is still in the dark, so she doesn’t understand that her relationship with Jesus isn’t over. She doesn’t yet know that Christ is within each of us and that his death isn’t ending their relationship but only enhancing it.

Put yourself in the garden, would you have run or would you have stayed? So often in life, we run. Running is usually the easier thing to do. It is usually the safer thing to do and certainly keeps us squarely in our comfort zone. Staying can be messy. Staying can bring raw emotions and put us in a place of vulnerability.

What does it look like in our lives to stay?

A friend has had a death in the family. You stop by to bring dinner not planning to stay, but you sense she wants to talk. You have a choice. You can return home or you can stay. Staying may bring tears. Staying may put you in a place where you feel you don’t have words, but words aren’t really what your friend needs.

Staying can be walking into a colleague's office with a simple question and sensing there is something going on with him. Again, you have a choice. You can ask your simple question and return to your office, or you can stay, ask the harder questions and then listen.

Staying can be sitting with someone on the school bus or on a park bench while your children play and genuinely asking how they are doing in a way that elicits an authentic response deeper than "I'm fine" and then listening to what is going on in their life.

Staying with our families can simply be interacting with each other rather than with our phones or it can be finishing a hard conversation where you see things differently instead of retreating to another part of the house. Staying looks different for each of us but the opportunities are endless.

In the midst of her weeping, Mary decides it is her turn to bend down and look in the tomb. Instead of just seeing the linen wrappings, she sees two angels in white where Jesus had been. That, in itself, should have gotten her attention, but she is still in the dark. Even though the angels brighten the tomb, Mary is still focused on the body. When they ask her why she is weeping, she has the same words she shared with the disciples. Then before Mary is aware, we are given the privilege of knowing that Jesus is present. Jesus, whom Mary supposes to be the gardener, asks the same question the angels just asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

I imagine Mary doesn't just have a few tears gently streaming down the corners of her eyes. I envision she is weeping with her full body. You know the type, when you can't catch your breath and it is hard to speak. Maybe this is part of why the angels' presence doesn't seem to phase her. She is so focused on Jesus' body that she isn't able to really see or recognize what is around her. It isn't until she hears her name "Mary!" that she sees and responds "Rabbouni."

What a moment that must have been. All the running around of the morning, all the worrying about Jesus' body, all the weeping, and then there is Jesus right in front of her. She didn't even recognize him. She took him for the gardener. Not until Jesus calls her name does she recognize him. Now that she has heard her name, you would think Mary would understand. You would think she has come out of the darkness and into the light, but she still doesn't fully comprehend what she is seeing.

Jesus' response to Mary exclaiming "Rabbouni!" is "Do not hold on to me." I envision Mary instinctively embraces Jesus with a huge hug or maybe she embraces his

feet in a worshipful response like the women in Matthew's gospel. Either way, Mary still doesn't understand that Jesus isn't there to stay.

There are times when staying comes naturally, but what allows us to stay, when everything within us is screaming run or return home? I believe it is love. Love that does not come from ourselves but from Jesus Christ who is the supreme expression of God's love. We can only love because God loves us first. God came to us in Jesus Christ. Only by receiving that love are we able to respond and share the love of Christ with others. Each time we fight the urge to run and instead stay present with the other, we are both blessed by the time spent together in relationship.

This week on Facebook, I read something that stayed with me. It said, "to be alive is to be vulnerable." As I reflected on the phrase, I found myself adding one word, "to be *fully* alive is to be vulnerable." If we choose to live life fully and choose to stay at those times when we are afraid, when we would rather play it safe, when we want to run or return home, then we will find ourselves in a place of vulnerability and out of our comfort zone, but we will also be offering the other an amazing gift, the gift of presence.

By staying and allowing herself to be vulnerable, Mary offered the gift of her presence and look what she received. She was the first to see the risen Christ. The relationship that she thought was over, becomes eternal.

Jesus calls Mary to go and share with the disciples Jesus' words that, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." She is the first to go and share the good news that she has seen the Lord, and she is only able to do this because she stayed at the empty tomb after the others left. By her presence, she receives the gift of encountering Jesus, the light of the world.

Mary was only able to recognize Jesus when he called her name. I believe Jesus is constantly calling our names. He is constantly calling us to recognize Jesus in the other person but do we have ears to hear?

Each time you choose to stay, not only will the other person experience the gift of your presence, but you will encounter the risen Christ in the relationship. We are created to be in relationship with God and one another. God deeply desires to be in relationship with us, and God is revealed through all our relationships when we have eyes to see.

We are no longer in the dark. The light of the risen Christ is within each of us. Go forth from this place whether it be running, walking or skipping, and share the good news. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.