

April 9th, 2023

John 20:1-18 “Who Are You Looking For?”

He is risen. (He is risen indeed). The Lenten fast is over. Today is Easter, the day of resurrection. Most Christians consider this day to be the most important celebration of the Christian faith. Christmas gets more publicity for sure, but Easter is the highest holy day in the church, because our hope has been fulfilled through the risen Christ. We are here today because he is risen. (He is risen indeed.)

I’ve really enjoyed this year’s Lenten focus. I use a variety of resources when it comes to finding inspiration for preaching. Sometimes I’m inspired by a book or a commentary or a Bible study podcast. Sometimes it comes from bouncing ideas off my clergy colleagues at our Wednesday coffee meetings. During the pandemic, my friend Andra Moran and some of her ministry colleagues put together some resources geared toward online worship which helped our church tremendously during the pandemic shutdown. But last year I discovered a resource called “A Sanctified Art.” I like these folks because the contributors are church leaders, theologians, musicians and artists from a variety of church traditions. This year, their Lenten program focused on questions. The theme was, “Seeking: Honest questions for deeper faith,” and I jumped on board because I’m always looking for ways to deepen my faith ... *and* I love questions.

Unfortunately, “question” has often been a contentious word in the church. In some churches, people are taught never to ask questions when it comes to matters of faith. If you’ve made the decision to follow Christ, you shouldn’t ask questions because Christ is the answer to everything. Kind of like the kid in Sunday School whose teacher asked if her students could tell her what’s small and furry, runs on four legs, climbs trees, can be either red or gray, has a bushy tail and gathers nuts for the winter. Silence. Not a word. Finally, one of the kids (probably the preacher’s kid) spoke up. “Ma’am, it sure sounds like you’re talking

about a squirrel, but this is Sunday School, so I know the answer has got to be ‘Jesus.’”

I think one of the reasons questions are discouraged is that some church leaders think questions go hand in hand with doubt, and doubt is seen by some folks as the opposite of faith. I disagree though. I believe the opposite of faith is *not* doubt. The opposite of faith is *certainty*. Faith, according to the book of Hebrews, is “the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” Faith does not require certainty. That’s why we call it “faith!” Now ... that’s not to say that certainty doesn’t have a place in our faith journey. There are a lot of things I’m certain about. In the book of Deuteronomy 7:9, the writer says, “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.” I know this to be true because I’ve experienced this kind of divine love personally. However-- In the book of Genesis, the earth is described as a land mass and the heavens are a dome placed over the earth to serve as a barrier from the waters from above that dome. The earth is also described as stationary and that the sun and moon revolve around the earth thanks to this dome. I *know* that this is not true. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, Galileo Galilei, the father of observational astronomy concluded that it was the earth that revolves around the sun, not the other way around. How do you think that observation went over with his church? Not so well. In 1615, the Catholic church held an inquisition and found Galileo “vehemently suspect of heresy,” and he was forced to recant his theory. He then spent the rest of his life under house arrest. But ... the Catholic church eventually saw the light, forgave him, and cleared him of any wrongdoing. Want to know when that happened? 1992! Thirty-one years ago! When I was 17 years old, I was in Sunday School and I asked about how the Prophet Jonah could have survived 3 days in the belly of a fish. I wasn’t put on trial like Galileo, but I was told to sit down, shut up and have more faith. I suppose that’s better than being thrown in jail for 377 years, but it still stung a little.

The point I'm trying to make is that questions are okay. Or at least they should be. We don't need to have all the answers to every question in order to have a rich, deep, growing faith. Questions are good. They keep us engaged. We've asked a lot of questions throughout this Lenten Season. "Where are we headed?" "Who is our crowd?" "Who will we listen to?" "How do we begin again?" "Can these bones live?" "Who sinned?" Today, the question on the table is, "Who are you looking for?" This was the question that Jesus asked Mary Magdalene when, after his execution on a cross, she couldn't find his body in the tomb where he was buried.

Jesus appeared to her and said, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" She thought he was the gardener and said, "If you've carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." She must have been in a haze of grief to not recognize him. I like what John says next. He writes, "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!'" I always picture Jesus smiling when he says this. Like, "Mary! Who are you talking to here?" And she'd say, "Oh my gosh, Rabbi!" The veil of grief is lifted and she beholds the risen Christ.

Who was Mary looking for? What did she expect? Well, apparently she was expecting a corpse. But when Jesus spoke her name, she realized that this was not the Jesus she came looking for. This was the resurrected Christ. He was the same as Jesus, but he was also different. Transformed. Transfigured. He had a new purpose. He said, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" That's when Mary went back to the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord." That's the good news. That's the gospel. Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed.) According to all four gospel writers, Mary, a *woman*, was the first evangelist to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ. I brought that up in Sunday School one time too. That didn't go over so well either. It's not like I was *trying* to be the problem kid in church. I just had questions about these

observations I was making. “Who are we looking for?” That’s a good question to ask on this Easter morning. Why have you come to the tomb? Who do we see when we encounter the living Christ? What veils need to be lifted so we can recognize resurrection in all the places it occurs? When the flowers come down will we continue to seek the miracle of God’s newness in the weeks and months to come? In what ways will you continue to look for Jesus in the world?

I think that maybe the better way for *us* to ask, “Who are you looking for?” is, “Who is the Jesus that we’re looking for?” Or maybe, “What kind of Jesus do we expect to find?” And to add on to that, so it makes sense to the church in the 21st century, maybe we should ask, “What kind of Jesus do we expect to find? The Jesus we want or the Jesus who is?” I say this, because sometimes we get an image of Jesus in our heads that may only be one aspect of the Jesus we read about in scripture. And we hang on to that image for dear life and disregard other aspects of Jesus that are also important. Which image of Jesus do you hold on to?

Is it, “Judgy Jesus?” – The Jesus who is looking over our shoulder just waiting for us to mess up and catch us in a lie? To add on to that, we want Jesus to judge other people for their individual sins. We want Jesus to disapprove of the people we disapprove of. Or worse, we want Jesus to hate the people we hate. We want a Jesus who is concerned about those who, “smoke or chew or hang out with people who do” as they say in the south. But the Bible tells us that Jesus is far more interested in judging the big picture sins that impact all of creation. The Risen Christ judges us by how we judge others. The Risen Christ calls us to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly, and love our neighbors as ourselves. “Do not hold on to me. Do not hold on to just this part of me.”

Then there’s “Jesus Meek and Mild” or “Guru Jesus” – This is the Jesus who is eternally passive and kind. Yet, the reality is that Jesus quite often became upset and used strong words to condemn evil as in the case of the money changers in the temple who had taken a good way to worship and connect with God and turned it into a money-making

scheme. Jesus called the corrupt religious leaders of the day, “white-washed tombs” and “a den of serpents.” Jesus called out people in power who took advantage of the powerless. He was not always passive. He was bold and fearless when it came to confronting evil.

But seeing only that aspect of Jesus leads to “John Wayne Jesus.” – This is the Jesus who carries the flag of nations ... who is the enemy of all other religions and faith traditions. This is the Jesus who blesses only those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps ... and people who don't have boots? Well, that's their problem, not his. Now, does Jesus want us to be able to take responsibility for our lives and make good choices and be productive citizens? Of course. But Jesus also calls us to care for those who are sick or addicted or who have been left behind or who have lost their way.

Who is the Jesus we are looking for? Who is the Jesus we want to hold on to and not let go of like Mary at the tomb? Well, let's look back at this story again – let's not just talk about what Jesus discouraged Mary from doing. Let's talk about what he told Mary to do. “Go tell my brothers.” Tell them what? What was the message that Mary brought back to the other disciples? “I have seen the Lord.” She saw the risen Christ in his totality and understood. Then she embraced the new mission and commission of the risen Christ. She was the first who in both word and action proclaimed the good news that “Christ is risen.”