

Grace and Responsibility

John 20:1-18, Easter B, 16 April 2006
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John 20

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, **"Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"** Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, **"Mary!"** She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, **"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.'"** ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Prayer.

In many pulpits across this land, indeed throughout the four corners of the globe, a message of grace will be preached this Easter Sunday. It goes like this: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Just as Jesus died, so too will you and I die one day. Our heart will fall silent and our lungs will cease to breath. Today, we remember the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. As Christ followers, we are led to believe that just as he rose from the dead, so too will you and I rise from the dead and take our place in heaven with him, around his heavenly throne. And one day, a day in the not-to-distant future, we expect Christ to return to earth, bringing us with him, and will establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

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This is classical theology at its best.

The Apostle Paul heavily supports this view of the world and this relationship with God. By God's grace we are saved through faith, he tells us. That is to say, this is God's free gift to us. We did nothing to deserve this gift. We've done nothing to earn it. It simply is the way it is; God knew our need before we were even aware that we needed to be saved. God loves us so much that we are given this gift, and it is ours for the claiming.

Indeed, John Wesley and a host of others have identified grace as an essential Protestant theological anchor, with which we secure our ship of faith.

Much to our surprise, grace has its critics. In the past 150 years, Christian fundamentalism has grown and spread like the plague. It loathes the fact that anything from God is free. Grace, like government social programs that support the undeserving, must be stamped out, lest they become accommodating and people grow dependent. Salvation must be earned, and those who don't invest in the hard work and heavy lifting of faith, well, they'll get what they deserve. To the fundamentalist, God is punitive in nature, not loving or graceful. God's law is absolute; he doesn't forgive, nor is he redemptive.

Modern fundamentalism is appealing to people who don't want to think. It tells them what to believe, and that's that. There is no questioning or challenging the absolute defining and defending Law of God.

Fundamentalism rules by intimidation.

Believe this, proclaim this, pray this, and avoid going to hell. Of course everyone, or nearly everyone, is going to fall into place and walk in lock-step (or should I say goose-step) with the program ... which serves as an insightful understanding of fundamentalist behavior.

The problem is, while modern fundamentalists claim they want to return to the basics of Christianity, the fundamental beliefs of the Early Church, few if any are willing to deal in any meaningful way with the issue of God's grace; the gracious nature of redemption and salvation, bought and paid for by Jesus Christ in and through his passion, death, and resurrection.

As painful as modern Christian fundamentalism may be, there is one redeeming value that it brings to the table of faith, something that all of us in the traditional, progressive, socially minded mainline churches should listen to with a critical and discerning ear. It is a message the apostle Paul would have benefited from, too. It tells us that with faith and grace comes responsibility.

Just as grace is the bane of fundamentalism, responsibility is the scourge of liberal theology.

I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to uphold both: faith balanced with responsibility.

We are responsible to act as a result of our faith. It is not enough to set on the sidelines as a casual observer of the Christian pilgrimage. Each of us is called to accountable, responsible, engaged, interactive discipleship. This is not my subjective opinion. This is my observation of the Gospel text, of the life and actions of Jesus.

Peter ran to the tomb, didn't know what to believe, so he returned home and didn't tell anyone. The other disciple, whom Jesus loved, ran to the tomb, saw the empty tomb, believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, but then, like Peter, he didn't do anything about it. Neither took the responsibility upon themselves to respond to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in any meaningful way.

How unfortunate for them.

But Mary, from the rural town of Magdala, who had been with Jesus from the beginning, supporting his ministry with her presence, faith, and gifts, comes to the tomb, sees that it is empty, believes that Christ is risen, encounters Christ, then returns and tells the whole world what has happened. She takes the responsibility upon herself to tell the world that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Reflect for a moment upon your journey of faith. How is it that you came to be seated right here, right now, this Easter morning? Was it a person who prodded you, who taught you, who invited you? Was it a person whom you've just found it easier to let them have their way instead of putting up resistance? Was it a pastor, preacher, parent, coworker, or friend that brought you to this experience of the resurrection story this morning?

Who ever it was, give thanks to God. Because these are the people who take responsibility seriously, who understand that action is a necessary compliment to faith, that faith without works is dead. These are the people who serve as positive roll models, as mentors of the Christian life. Be they living or be they a Saint of the Church who has gone on to glory, just as they followed in the footsteps of Christ, so too should we join the example. Just as they've married faith and responsible, accountable discipleship, so too should this be our ideal, our goal, and our perfection.

To some, the message this morning that Christ is alive! will be met with – “great! now what can I get away with?”

To others, the message this morning that Christ is alive! will be met with – “great! now all those sinners are going to get theirs!”

But to us, the message this morning that Christ is alive! should be met with a quiet, faithfully determination. Not only are we called to believe, we are also called to do something about it.

It's ok to swim upstream, to make a resolute effort to not go with the popular culture that avoids responsibility at all costs. As Disciples of Christ, take heart! Have faith! Believe in the resurrection! And go forth, taking responsibility to become Christ's apostles, ambassadors, missionaries, and ministers living his example in a broken world.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.