

Looking And Not Finding

Matthew 28:1-10

April 16, 2017

In many ways I still carry around the summer of 1991. It was a memorable time for me. Some of my experiences back then left their mark, but today one experience in particular comes to mind; the death of my grandfather, Walter "Tee-Pot" Frye. Now truth be told, and this is not easy to admit, I had not been the grandson I wanted to be in the months leading up to his death. The thing is, I didn't know how to handle standing by as cancer reduced this larger than life hero of mine to a mere mortal. So I stayed away. Maybe other teenagers would do the same as I did, but I wish I had done things differently.

I did end up spending time with Pop, but only after he died and looking back, I believe my desire to be with him is part of the reason I spent so much time with him as he laid in the casket at the Funeral Home. When everyone left the visitation, I stayed. That next morning, I arrived at the Funeral Home before the first employee and patiently waited for the doors to open. As soon as they did, I went directly to the room where Pop laid. I opened the casket (I know, some of you might be thinking how weird, but it was what I needed and it is time I will always cherish) I pulled up a chair and continued right where I had left off the night before. At that point I just wanted to be with him... near him.

I apologized for not being there more often during those last months... He let me know he understood and that it was OK.

I told him over and over and over how much I loved him... He let me know he knew that all along, and that He loved me too.

I told him how much I would miss him... He let me know he would always be around.

I found as much peace and quiet as I could so that I could empty my sorrows to this man I so deeply loved. It was all I could do. No one directed me to do it. No one suggested that I do it. I just did it, and those around me provided the space I needed.

When I read Matthew's Gospel text for today, I think Mary Magdalene and the other Mary wanted to do something similar when they went to the tomb. You see, Matthew tells us that their reason for being there was simply to look at the tomb. Isn't this similar to others who simply want to sit alongside a loved one they have just lost. It is as though Matthew wants us to see the heartfelt human side of these women, instead of the side formed by adhering to rules and rituals and customs, like how to properly bury the dead. And while there is nothing wrong with adhering to rules, rituals and customs, Matthew doesn't focus on them. Instead, he tells us about two women who came to see the tomb. Two women, mourning the loss of one they loved. Two women who simply wanted to be near him. No indication that they brought spices like we find in Mark's and Luke's account. What we have with Matthew's account is two women, mourning a loss by doing what any of us would do... take advantage of any peaceful, quiet moment we can

find just to be near our loved one and stay there as long as we can. Maybe they needed some peace and quiet so that they could pour out their sorrow.

Peace and quiet is not exactly what they got when they arrived at the tomb though, is it? Do you remember what happened when they arrived? [Read Matt. 28:2-4]

“And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.”

An Earthquake;

An Angel;

Stunned Guards; and

Messages that the one they are looking for cannot be found here.

In this way, Matthew’s account of Jesus’ graveside scene is clearly the most dramatic of the Gospels, and for this reason some scholars have suggested Matthew added some details to make things a bit more spectacular, but New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says, “For Matthew, standing within a long Jewish tradition in which angels tended to appear at great moments within God’s purposes, this wasn’t a problem.” (NT for Everyone Commentary). We at FBCJ know a little of what N.T. Wright is saying, for we have heard a good bit about Angels appearing since the start of 2017 and like I’ve said before, there seems to be something to this idea of God communicating through Angels or messengers... and this story is no exception.

And while Angels of God always seem to begin their conversations by saying “Don’t be afraid,” how could these women not be afraid? Only days before they entertained grand visions of the Kingdom of God with Jesus Christ as Lord. Life, when he was with them, had been good in so many ways. Now, though, their life had become anything but those grand visions.

Jesus had been crucified!

The earth upon which they were standing firm shook!

An angel of the Lord appeared and was talking directly to them and told them that the man crucified, the man who three days earlier had died, was actually alive!

How could they not be afraid?

It does appear that all of their fear didn’t evaporate because the text goes on to tell us that they quickly left the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell the disciples. As they were running, though, they run into Jesus, who, like the Angel before him, says to the women, “Do not be afraid.” Maybe because Jesus said it this time “Do Not be afraid” had its desired effect. Or maybe it was the fact that this man, once dead was now alive and saying it, but no matter what, Jesus saying “Do not be afraid” worked as this is the last anyone speaks of fear in the Gospel.

When Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” he is making a clear statement that “the end” is not what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary originally thought. For them, the earthquake and the resurrection are clear signs that the end was upon them so surely, they wondered about the end. What kind of end would it be? For them... For those who deserted Jesus. What about the one who denied Jesus or those who were powerless to do anything but look on at the horrific

crucifixion? Isn't it safe to assume they wondered if Jesus' blood shed would be a judgment against them? Doesn't this make their fear more understandable?

The Good News though, is that just like countless other times, Jesus finds Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. He finds them, not the other way around. They were told they would find him in Galilee, but Jesus found them on the path they were actually traveling. And while Jesus finding them on the way is part of the Good News, there is more... this time fear lost its grip, and freedom took its place.

As more and more followers of "The Way" (those earliest followers of Jesus were not called Christians, they were known as followers of The Way) came to recognize the risen Christ, they experienced boldness and freedom of speech like never before. The best way I know to describe such boldness and freedom is by saying their security came from the inside out. They were not afraid of people who scoffed at their claims. They were not afraid of authorities who ordered them to stop speaking of Jesus. They were free from what the neighbors thought about them and free from what the established power structure could do to them.

What might that kind of freedom mean for you? How might it change the way you listen? How might it change the way you pass a stranger? Would Freedom like that change anything about you?

The Freedom those early followers of Jesus experienced in his resurrection changed everything about their lives, especially in the ways they dealt with those trying to harm them. You see after Christ's resurrection those first disciples were often in harm's way. They were oftentimes threatened, but the threat no longer owned them. Another's power over them was no longer all that they knew about themselves. In Christ's resurrection, they discovered that even after all their mistakes... even after all their cowardly and foolish ways... even after all their fear led to statements of un-belief, Jesus came back to them. Jesus found them and when he did he let them know they no longer had to be afraid, and they believed him.

We see this just a few weeks after the resurrection, on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter and the others were warned by the authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. These same disciples, who had denied him and hidden away for their own self-preservation, now boldly proclaimed the resurrection...even in the face of deadly threats by the religious and governmental authorities.

In his resurrection, Jesus let them know that God is no enemy.

In his resurrection, Jesus became the clearest example of true Love, which is never about self and always about the other.

In his resurrection, Jesus showed everyone that this true Love is God's very essence!

Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who came to the tomb looking for Jesus without actually finding him, the resurrected Christ found them and from that moment on, they, and all who followed Jesus, were never the same. They were bold and they were free because if Jesus was alive they believed anything was possible. Can't you just feel the hope in someone who comes to believe that anything is possible?

Having an experience that leaves you with such hope must be life changing and maybe some of you have had similar life changing moments. While some may have experienced good moments, say a wedding or the birth of a child or grandchild, others may have been not so good, like a serious illness or the death of someone you loved deeply. No matter good or bad, such moments leave us changed and cause us to ask different questions, and quite possibly rearrange priorities.

The thing is, even though our world and its reality is far different from the first century world, people are still people. Life changing moments are still life changing moments and odds are the change brought into your life was not to decide to fill every waking hour with more and more activity. I suspect the change was more like making sure what you did really counted for something worthwhile, meaningful and lasting.

That is what Easter does for us. It energizes us! The Bible tells us that the women left the tomb filled with a mixture of fear and joy, and that they “ran” to tell the others. I’ll bet they ran! They could not be held back. They had “Good News” and could not wait to tell the others.

My Mom has told me a story numerous times about something that happened shortly before my Pop passed away. Cancer had eaten away and left him unable to do anything but lay on the hospital bed Hospice setup in his home. He wasn’t eating or drinking and was unable to speak. But before this time I believe he and my Mom had discussed death, and Pop had even shared some of his fears with her. A few years ago, while my own Dad could still communicate with me, he shared similar fears with me, and I pray I experience something similar to what my Mom experienced with her Dad.

As Pop laid in that hospital bed, a mere skeleton of himself, surrounded by my Mema, my Mom and my Aunt Dayl, he sat up. While sitting up he looked at each of them individually, but looking at them was only part of the story. It was the look of unspeakable joy that consumed him that my Mom remembers. He smiled from ear to ear as he spent those last moments looking at his wife and two of his daughters. As my Mom said, whatever he was seeing made him joyful and let us know that he was joyful about that next step. I would have loved being there to see with my own eyes, but the truth of the matter is I find great comfort in knowing it happened. Much like I find great comfort, great joy, in knowing that Christ’s resurrection happened. There is unbelievable freedom in this knowing. It is a freedom that calls me to respond with boldness. It is a freedom to believe in blessings and to believe that all of us are worthy of those blessings.

So as we leave here today, on this glorious Easter day may we truly experience this freedom. May it change us in the most positive, loving way possible and may we find everlasting joy as we follow The Way of the Risen Christ!

Amen.