

April 16, 2017

Lesson 7: John 19: 38-42; 20:1-10; 1 Peter 1:3-9

God's Love as Victory Over Death

Context:

Today we celebrate the highest holy day in the Christian calendar. Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! It is to be a day of rejoicing and a day where we gather with the Christian body to celebrate that Jesus not only died for us, he stayed true to his promise and rose from the grave.

In today's lesson, we have two scripture passages that tell us the good news about Jesus. The first comes from the Gospel of John. All four of the gospels in their canonical form contain stories of the risen Christ and all culminate with someone(s) discovering an empty tomb. All writers knew it was tantamount to Jesus' promise, but each had their own way of presenting how the empty tomb was discovered. Each has its own tale and each has a beautiful way of retelling the best news that could be told.

In the Gospel of John, we have the only account of Mary the Magdalene going to the tomb. We don't know why Mary the Magdalene went there, but we might imagine several reasons for going to the tomb early in the morning. Perhaps a reason for going so early was so that she wouldn't be caught going to the place where a revolutionary had been buried. As to the reason, it was common to go to the tomb of the one you love and anoint the body with ointments and spices so that the smell would not be overwhelming. Or maybe Mary wanted to see if it was true; that her Lord had risen from the grave. She runs back and two of the others come to see what has happened and if there is truth. They are astonished to find it empty even with a towel folded in place.

Later we will read that as Mary the Magdalene weeps at the tomb, two angels will appear and Christ reveals himself to her. It is an amazing moment in which she realized that Jesus was true to his word and he has risen from the grave. It is a moment of celebration.

Our second passage comes from First Peter, an epistle in the New Testament. It is part of a group of writings known as the "catholic epistles," including other books such as James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 1-3 John. They are referred to as catholic epistles because they were believed not to be written to a specific community, but a church at large.¹ The author attributed to the letter is the original apostle Peter. Scholars assert that there are some similarities to Pauline writings and believe that the letter may have been sent from a group of missionaries who had come to Rome with Paul or Peter.² The addresses are identified as "exiles" in the beginning of the letter. This could refer to the "diaspora" or Jews who had to live among the Gentiles. In this particular epistle, the author would have been speaking to people who were in an alien status in different parts of Asia Minor.³ This epistle speaks to five provinces in the Roman divisions of Asia Minor meaning this letter would be directed to Christians living in the rural parts of the Roman Empire and not the populous cities of the coast.⁴ Being aliens in isolated rural areas who practiced a

¹ PHEME PERKINS, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, Interpretation: A Biblical Guide for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 1.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

different religion from the polytheistic world persecution would have caused a lot of duress and fear for what would happen to them.⁵ Thus, the author sought to give them encouragement and love as they faced the future.

Application:

From our first Resurrection story in the Gospel of John, we hear the complete awe and shock of the disciples after they rush to see an empty tomb. A key point sticks out about the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is the first to arrive after Mary the Magdalene brings the news that Jesus is not there. After he and Peter peer in the tomb, it is said: “He saw and believed.” While we are told that they didn’t understand at the time that Jesus must rise from the dead, I wonder if that’s true. The disciple whom Jesus loved must have heard him talk about it and when he saw, maybe he did truly believe in the Resurrection. While we will never know, I do think it brings a good point about how we understand Resurrection. For some scholars, historians, skeptics, and even jaded Christians, there is a focus on how do you prove physically that Jesus rose from the dead. I’ll never forget as a child and teenager watching the History Channel attempt to understand every physical part of the passion story: if Jesus really did sweat blood, the possibilities of an earthquake happening when he died, and the list goes on and on. What can we prove? What can we see? What can we know?

While I am definitely an advocate of research and asking deep questions, I think this is one of those things that’s not meant to be explained by large tomes of books or tons of research done in a lab or library. I think the words of 1 Peter help us to understand what Jesus’ resurrection means: “You have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”⁶ Jesus’ resurrection is about hope, realizing that death and sin do not ever get the final say.

As I’ve alluded to before, my Lent journey has been changed in a deep way. When my Father died on Ash Wednesday three years ago, that season of Lent was truly a time in the wilderness. Some days were harder to get up than others. Some days were just plain difficult in that first season as I returned back to school and tried to get back into a schedule and graduate in May from Vanderbilt Divinity School. But I’ll never forget a Teaching Assistance at Vanderbilt helping me caught up with work when he shared a story about a loved one that died. He said, “It will change the way you see Easter. It will change what Resurrection means to you.” His words were a comfort to me and I clung to them throughout those weeks that are now such a blur.

I knew what he meant when I entered into my father’s church that Sunday with my mother and sister, seeking to be moved, seeking to find hope in such a strange time. And sure enough, I heard words I needed to hear throughout worship and throughout the day. The Alleluia box was opened and we recited the words to the liturgy: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia.” The adult, youth and children’s choirs sang with gusto and we sang all the words to “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” An associate pastor who is a dear friend and was right there after Dad’s death led the prayers and Apostles’ Creed with passion and grace. A retired pastor got up and preached about the power of Resurrection in the midst of death and pain. People smiled and hugged our family with

⁵ Ibid., 16

⁶ 1 Peter 1:3b, NRSV.

tears in their eyes.

And there I realized that I don't need a scientific analysis of the plausibility of the Resurrection. No professors or degrees to understand the truth of Jesus' words. All I needed to know was that Jesus was true to his word and the tomb was empty. And I was there to celebrate with others who believed in his power and who knew he would be true to his word. He is risen indeed!

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