

Up to the Choice?

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
John 20:1-18
Acts 10: 34-43

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Acts 10:34-43

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

John 20:1-18

Early 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.



It’s all about choices.

A man and his ever-nagging wife went on vacation in Jerusalem and while they were there, sadly, the wife died. The undertaker in Jerusalem told the husband, "You can have her buried here in the Holy Land for \$150 or we can have her shipped back home for \$5,000. The husband thought about the choice – \$150 in Jerusalem, \$5,000 back home – and he told the undertaker he would have her shipped back home. The undertaker scratched his head, "Why would you spend \$5,000 to have her shipped home when you could have a beautiful burial here, and it would only cost \$150?" The husband replied, "Well, long ago a man died here, was buried here, and three days later, rose from the dead. I just can't take that chance!"

It's all about choices, isn't it?

When I go to a restaurant with a friend, I sit down, pick up the menu, and begin to look down the list. Roast beef, chicken, ham, spaghetti – obviously I'm not visiting five star restaurants – cheeseburger, chef salad. “What to have, what to have, hmmm.” Inevitably I ask my dinner partner, “What are you having tonight?” Do you do that? And once I get the response, I'm often inclined to say, “Hmm, that sounds good. I think I'll have that too.” And I fold up the menu having made *my* decision.

It happened again just the other day. I was out for lunch with my friend Karen who said, “I think I'll have the BLT.” I thought to myself, “That's a good idea. Me too.” When the waitress came over, I ordered my BLT – she next looked to Karen who said, “I'll have the chicken salad.” “What !?!,” I protested, “I thought you wanted the BLT. Make up *my* mind, already, won't you?!?!”

I'm terrible at making choices like that. How about you? I don't want to have to choose one way or the other, so I rely on someone else's decision to make up my mind. I think I've made the decision, but in reality I have followed another's lead.

I sometimes wonder how I get by – how any of us get by. We make any number of choices everyday — what clothes to wear, what food to eat, what route to take to work, what to buy at the mall or supermarket, what to do that evening. We make decisions all the time – we make trivial and life-altering decisions even in the same day. To which school should I send my children?; paper or plastic – credit or debit?; should I follow the doctor's advice or get a second opinion?; do I want ground round or sirloin?

Yet most of us are pretty poor at choice-making. Our choices aren't always the best for us or for others that the choices effect, yet we make them. Or we think we do. Usually we're just following someone else's lead.

The old saying is “I don't have to do *anything* except pay my taxes and die.” And even the tax thing is a choice, isn't it? We actually *choose* to pay our taxes before April 15th — there might be consequences if we don't — but we do make the choice every year. I don't have to file a tax return, but I do it anyway.

This morning even, you have already made a bunch of choices. You have chosen to be here — you didn't have to come — you chose to come. You made a decision. Maybe you just followed someone else's lead, but on this one I suspect it was your individual decision. (Thank you for the choice, by the way!)

Choices are unavoidable life situations. Some choices are good, some are bad. But choices have to be made. And you're going to leave here this afternoon having to make another choice. A very important choice.

Early one Sunday morning a young woman went to the tomb of her close friend who had been tried, convicted, and unjustly put to death by the most powerful justice system in the civilized world. She made choices that morning. She decided what to wear, what to eat, which path to travel, whether to go alone or not, whether to go at all. She risked this visit to the criminal's hastily arranged tomb — he was her friend and she needed to make sure he was taken care of even in death. And, like most of us faced with the death of someone we love, she needed to see him one last time to put herself at peace.

When she got there, she discovered that the body had been taken away. She ran and told some other friends what she had discovered. “They've taken him out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him,” she told the others in a panicked and frightened voice. “Why would anyone do that? Why?”

These two other friends ran to check it out for themselves — they went inside the tomb and found the cloths that had covered their dead friend's body. They chose to go and see what Mary was talking about. Once they saw it, it seems like they didn't care very

much. The story tells us that one of the guys “went in and he saw and believed.” What did he believe? He believed that Jesus’ body had been taken away, that’s all, not that anything necessarily miraculous had happened. How casually Peter and the other disciple, the Gospel says, “returned to their homes.” They made choices — some bad, some good. They chose to go and check out Mary’s story – good choice – and then they chose to go home – bad choice. Apparently the empty tomb was nothing to get very excited about.

Mary, though, decided to make a second trip to the tomb — she chose to look inside this second time. As she wiped away her tears, she encountered the reality of what had taken place. This was not just a body-snatching. It was a miraculous resurrection.

Jesus spoke to her. “Mary!” Look what her choice to go back that second time did for her. She went back to see more and it created in her a new life and a new excitement. This time she ran off to tell whoever would listen — she made another choice — she “went and announced” what had happened. She went to tell the others that she had seen Jesus!

Choices were made that early morning while it was barely light. Choices made — good and bad. The two disciples chose to go on home, seemingly unaffected. Mary heard and saw and obeyed — she chose to go and tell of the resurrection.

We have that choice before us today. Do we, like the two men in the story, leave this place after our lovely little Easter morning with flowers and music and new clothes, go have a great Easter dinner and eat jelly beans? And then tomorrow do we just go about our business as usual? Paper or plastic; credit or debit?; ground round or sirloin; BLT or chicken salad.

Or do we “go and tell” what we have experienced again this year? Do we go and tell everyone that the unbelievable has happened – that the kids at church cut off the pastor’s tie? Or do we choose to leave here this morning ready to tell everyone what

seems just as unbelievable – that we encountered Jesus and he is alive and well and living right here in Havertown?

We can go either way. We can choose either direction. We can just go on home holding tight to the believable or we can go and tell the seemingly unbelievable good news. The choice is ours.

One of the problems, though, is if we go and tell, what is it we’re going to tell? Many people will choose to just go home this morning simply because they think they have nothing to tell. Mary had something to tell — a dead man was in some mysterious way, and certainly in her heart, alive again and spoke to her. Her friend who she saw suffer a cruel death now walked in the garden where they had placed his body. A miracle occurred and it changed Mary’s life. She could go off and tell people about that resurrection and its impact on her life.

In an Email the other day, I received a list of funny proverbs – things like: “Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach that person to use the Internet and they won't bother you for weeks.” Another of the proverbs revealed to me something about this resurrection that we talk about today. “There is a theory,” says the proverb, “which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.”

Isn’t that something of what Mary’s story is about? In her grief at the foot of the cross and her tears at the placing of Jesus in the tomb, she thought she had discovered exactly what the universe is all about – you live and then you die and maybe somewhere in the middle you make a difference, and that’s about it. But then that universe disappeared on her, vanished, and she discovered an empty tomb a few days after she thought life ended – and something more inexplicable took its place. The concreteness of death in her known universe was replaced with the mystery of

resurrection in a new universe.

And guess what? The second half of that proverb is totally on point. “There is a theory which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.” It *has* already happened. What we have always thought of as the reality of the universe – death at the end of life, that one thing which we think we have no control over, which choice has nothing to do with – is no longer the reality, replaced by the inexplicable mystery of resurrection, new life opened to us because of the empty tomb.

That’s what Mary discovered. That’s what we have to go and tell. “The best and most beautiful things in the world, cannot be seen or even touched,” wrote Helen Keller, “- they must be felt with the heart.” And that which you feel with your heart must be shared from your heart. Go and tell.

We haven’t had the opportunity to experience that exact same moment that Mary did. We weren’t at the tomb that morning. We’re not Mary. The resurrection she experienced happened only once, didn’t it? And we can’t go around in today’s culture talking about a 2,000 year old miracle, can we?

In the lesson from Acts this morning, Peter was faced with a similar kind of problem — what to tell. He told about his experience with Jesus — personal experiences that you and I don’t have the privilege of being a part of because we didn’t walk with Jesus or talk with Jesus in first century Palestine. But what we need to understand is the context into which Peter’s “telling” falls.

You see, Peter had always insisted that he would limit himself to the Jewish community. He had insisted that to be a Christian, one had to first be a Jew. For many years he wouldn’t back away from that position. For many years he refused to even talk with Gentiles who claimed to believe. Now, though, Peter’s perspective

was changing. God revealed to him that no one should be denied the message that was to be proclaimed.

Peter’s “telling” is in the context of a transformation of his life. He was being transformed by the power of God, the same power that had caused the resurrection of Jesus had now transformed Peter. In fact, it changed the future of the Church. Resurrection and transformation.

There’s not much difference between the two when it comes down to it. God creates something new from what was once old. Life from death is what Mary experienced at the tomb — life from death is what Mary had to go and tell. Inclusion from exclusion is what Peter experienced at Joppa — and he had to go and tell.

Has transformation happened in your life? Has something happened that you have to go and tell the world about? Have there been those powerful moments when life has come out of death, beauty out of ugliness, good out of evil, truth out if confrontation? In these transformations in your life can you see the power of God at work? Can you see the same power of God that caused the resurrection?

Those transformations in your life are created by the same God that brought about the resurrection. Anyone affected by that kind of transformation has to go and tell. They can’t just go home!

There are people that have spent years going back and forth from home to work — living a materially comfortable living — not caring too much about anything but themselves — passing the homeless and the hungry on the streets. Suddenly a person such as this looks into the eyes of a mother and her children living in a cardboard box outside Suburban Station — and that person can no longer continue as they have been living. That person’s life can no longer be selfish but has to be selfless. A sudden realization — a transformation — a resurrection — that those in the box are no different from those on the train.

There are people who have turned their backs on violence that happens in our neighborhoods and there are people who have been transformed by confronting that injustice. On Good Friday I stood and sang and prayed with 300 people in Kensington as our Heeding God's Call gun violence prevention movement continued to gain momentum and I experienced the ongoing transformation of children and youth and adults, black and white and brown, able and disabled, rich and poor, urban and suburban – transformed from feeling powerless to feeling resurrected.

Old universes disappear – new universes appear – and that's what we celebrate this morning and every time we worship in the space.

Those moments of transformation are created by the same God who created that resurrection that Mary experienced and changed the reality of Mary's universe.

You have a choice to make today. You can return home and not say a word to anyone about what is happening in your life. Or you can go from here and tell anyone who will listen how it is that God is transforming your life. If you need an opening ice-breaker that will let you tell of the unbelievable that we celebrate – tell them about my tie.

And if you make that choice to go and tell, you do have something to tell about. You can tell about the resurrections in your life — about the transformations that have happened to you. Those transformations have been caused by the same God who caused the resurrection of 2,000 years ago in that garden tomb.

I know for a fact that somewhere in your existence you have been transformed. There are transformations created by God all over our lives! If there were none, we would not be here this morning worshiping the God that you worship!

You can go on home quietly if you want, but I hope you don't. I hope you'll choose to go and tell of those transformations and let everyone know where those transforming events came from.

And by the way, God continues to transform. God continues to use the power that brought about Jesus' resurrection each and every day. God is not dormant between Christmas and Easter. So you can come back next week and the week after and the week after and next month — and as together we, through resurrection, transform this place called Hope, you can tell us about the transformations that are happening to you. We are all people of God's resurrection power — we are all people of God's transformations.

Don't just return home this afternoon. Go and tell.

Amen.