

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 23, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“WHAT EASTER GIVES BACK TO US”

John 20:11-18

A man who grew up in Prince Edward Island tells of his childhood when boys carved model ships and sailed them in the waters off the sandy beaches. He worked for hours and took pride in his workmanship. His boat was the finest. One day while he was sailing it, he missed the turning tide and the little craft was taken from him. But months later, in a nearby town he unexpectedly saw his ship in a shop window. He was filled with joy, went home, took money from his jar and redeemed his boat from the shop. From then on he kept a close eye on it as he sailed it. The process of having it taken from him and then getting it back made the boat doubly special in his eyes.

When we lose something valuable or have it taken from us, we don't expect to get it back. Experience tells us that generally once something is gone, it's gone. We can only grieve it's loss.

So we can identify with Mary Magdalene's grief on Easter Sunday morning. No one loved Jesus like Mary loved him. Now there is no evidence that Mary and Jesus were married as some have suggested. In fact, the formal titles Mary uses to speak of Jesus in John 20:11-18, "Lord" and "Teacher" are not terms a wife would use for her husband. "Lord" and "Teacher" describe who Jesus was for Mary. And the reason Mary loved Jesus was because of what he had done for her. Mary was from the town of Magdala, a Roman outpost with many soldiers stationed in the town. It had a reputation as a racy place. It's possible Mary was one of the town prostitutes.

Now as far as we know, Jesus never visited Magdala. But according to Luke chapter 7 he did visit Simon the Pharisee in nearby Capernaum. While Jesus was in Simon's house, a woman, who "had lived a sinful life" brought a jar of perfume. She stood at Jesus' feet weeping. Then she bent down and wiped his feet with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven," and told Simon that the one who has been forgiven much also loves much. Scholars think this woman was probably Mary Magdalene. Right after this scene at Simon's house, Luke lists some woman who were following Jesus. The first one named is Mary Magdalene who had been delivered from seven demons. Mary loved Jesus because he had forgiven her much and loved her into a new and higher life.

Kahlil Gibran has Jesus speaking to Mary, “You have many lovers, but I alone love you. Other men have loved themselves in your nearness, I love you in yourself. Other men see a beauty that shall fade sooner than their own years. I see a beauty in you that shall not fade away, and in the autumn of your days that beauty shall not be afraid to gaze at itself in the mirror and it shall not be offended. I alone love the unseen in you.” And Mary says, “On that day the sunset of His eyes slew the dragon in me and I became a woman.”

So Mary loved Jesus. Then on Friday, it seemed to be all over. Jesus was crucified. Early Sunday morning she went to his tomb to grieve near his buried body. But it seemed that even this would be denied her. For she found the tomb open and his body gone. Weeping she said to the angels, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:13) For Mary it was a Good Friday world, a world defined by grief and tears. The one she loved had been taken from away from her and much else with him.

But suddenly, it was all given back to her. Her eyes still blinded with tears, Mary supposed Jesus to be the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him, “Rabboni.” (John 20:16). It has been called the greatest recognition scene in all literature. It could be also be called the greatest restoration scene. For Easter gave back to Mary everything that Good Friday had taken away. And not just for Mary, but for us, too. Easter gives back to us all that Good Friday had taken away.

Now by Easter, I mean the real resurrection of Jesus Christ. I don’t believe that Easter was something that only happened in the disciples’ imagination, or something that they wished had happened. Actually, they were very surprised by the whole event. I don’t believe that Jesus’ bones are still buried somewhere still waiting to be dug up. The tomb was empty on Easter Sunday morning. God’s power had loosed Jesus physically and spiritually from the bonds of death. Yes, Jesus’ body had been transformed by God’s resurrection power but it was still recognizably Jesus for those who had known him. So when I speak about Easter, I am speaking about a real event, God’s raising of His Son from the grave. So what does Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, give back to us?

First of all, Easter gives us back the promise of joy.

Often we’re told that on Easter day we should feel nothing but joy. Well, maybe some of us do. But some of us may not be feeling all that joyful. And that’s OK. There may be good reasons why you’re not feeling joyful today. This has been a tough year for many of us. Easter does not mean that we will or should always feel joyful. There will still be days of weeping. There will be times when we keenly feel our losses and our disappointments, as Mary did at the tomb. We will sometimes feel heartache over our own sins and the sins of

the world. We may weep as we think of a loved one from whom we are separated for some reason. There are days when this is still a dark Good Friday world.

But if Good Friday takes away our joy, Easter gives back to us the promise of joy. So it was for Mary. From Friday until the moment of recognition, Mary probably thought she would never know real joy again. But then Christ came to her, and she went off with joy to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord."

Easter is the promise that even if you weep now, joy is coming. There may be clouds in your sky, but one day the sun will shine again for you. A great Easter text comes from Psalm 30, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning." If you feel sad today, know that joy is ahead. Easter is the promise that sadness and grief are not the last word. It tells us that we will rejoice in God's love, in the victory of Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We will know the joy of forgiveness and the peace of reconciliation, the joy of glimpsing God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. And one day the joy we know here only in part will come in all its fullness. The Book of Revelation tells us that in the age to come, "God will wipe away every tear from their eye. There will be no more death, no more mourning, or crying or pain, for the old things have passed away." There are days when you weep, but Easter promises that joy that is on its way and indeed may be just around the corner. It may even meet you today. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Easter also gives us back our faith.

Mary not only loved Jesus. She believed in him. She had faith in Him. She trusted that what he had done for her and given her was real. But when he was taken from her so too was the forgiveness he had given her, the new life, the strength, the peace. When Jesus died, so did her faith and all the hopes he had raised up in her. But on Easter Sunday, the Risen One came and called her name and it was all given back to her. She knew that all Jesus had done for her was real. Easter gave back to Mary her faith.

The apostle Paul sees clearly that our faith rests on a real resurrection of Christ. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and so is your faith. If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is in vain. And those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost." Paul hangs it all on Christ's real resurrection. If Christ has not been raised, our faith, the forgiveness of our sins, our fondest hopes for resurrection and reunion beyond the grave, our hopes and dreams for justice and righteousness to prevail, all this is taken from us. If Christ has not been raised we live in a world in which sin and death and evil and darkness reign, a world of endless Good Fridays. But says Paul, indeed, or in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.(1

Corinthians 15:20) If Good Friday snatches away our faith Easter gives it back to us. Easter restores all our hopes for this world and beyond. Because Christ was raised his death on the Cross really accomplished our salvation. We who trust in Him are no longer in our sins. We really are forgiven by God and reconciled with Him.

The headlines over these last weeks have been about unsavoury things like Governors resigning for activities or should I say, sins, nearly as old as humanity itself. Would that those involved in the scandal find true love and forgiveness and new life in Jesus that Mary found. But something else has been going on even more significant. It's how banks and financial institutions have invested money in assets that have turned out to be essentially worthless, or at least worth far less than their face value. For a time investors plowed money into gold and oil futures, but now they're dropping, too. So where does one invest?

But here's my point. When you invest your faith in something or someone, you want to make sure that it's backed by something real and solid. And there is nothing more real and solid than the resurrection of Christ. And while it does take a leap of faith to believe in Christ's resurrection, the evidence supporting it is so strong that it makes that leap of faith quite small. As a preacher I proclaim and insist on Christ's real resurrection. For only a truly risen Christ can support real faith and real hope. If Christ is not raised, we still live in a Good Friday world of darkness and despair. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, and all our faith and all our hopes have been given back to us.

Finally, Easter gives us back Christ himself.

Mary's words are so sad, "They have taken away my Lord." That's what Good Friday did for Mary and for all the followers. It took Jesus away and buried him. But Easter gave Jesus back to Mary and to all his people. "I have seen the Lord," she said. Unlike other religions, we do not worship a dead leader, whose bones are buried in a tomb. We don't just remember a person from the history books, we know and worship a Risen Christ, a real living person. Now we can't hold Jesus, for he comes to us and stays with us on his terms, not ours. We don't hold him, but he holds us. He is with the church as a very real power and presence, one who walks with us, and helps us even when we may not know it or recognize him. But somewhere along the way he will make himself known so that we know him and know that he has been with us all the way. Easter gives us back Jesus himself and He is the One, the only One who makes this promise, "I am with you always, to the close of the age."