

April 20 – Easter – A Series of Questions

John 20:1-18

As I was reading again all the various accounts of the first Easter as contained in the Scriptures, I was struck by how many questions are asked in these stories. The more I looked at those questions I realized that in some profound way we are still, to this day, being asked or asking them. So let us explore the questions of Easter and grapple with how we are needing to answer them today.

The first question was asked by the women as they approached the tomb. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome were bringing spices, so that they might finish the embalming process. The question: **“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”** There was no expectation of a miracle. They had a job to do and they had a problem to solve.

We ask this type of question all of the time. We ask, “How am I going to do this?” or “Who am I going to get to help me?” or “How am I going to endure?” In all cases there is a statement of problems and we look only to our own resources for getting the job done. We think we have to solve it, or endure it, or we have to find someone to help us. We don't lift the problem up to God. It is our task to deal with. We know what happens that first Easter. God is at work and the stone has been rolled away. They will soon find out that the need of spices for embalming is gone. Jesus is alive! This first question of Easter is a challenge to each of us, when we are facing problems and struggles, to come to God in expectation of help. To focus first on what God can and is doing instead of trying to deal with it ourselves, and only afterwards asking God, is our challenge. We are too proud and see self-reliance as a virtue. We need to understand that this mindset often blocks us from the help God wants to give us to deal with the problems of life.

He had never cooked. Making a piece of toast for breakfast was about as far as his culinary expertise went. His wife was a fabulous cook and so there was no need, or so he thought, to learn. Then she had a stroke. Her speech was impaired and the weakness on her right side made it impossible for her to cook. She came home a few

days after her stroke and their daughter was with them. She did the cooking and made up some food for the freezer. But finally she had to get back to her home. He saw the dwindling supply of food and panicked. He called restaurants to see what it would cost to purchase take out. He went to the grocery store and looked at the prepackaged stuff in the frozen food section and was unimpressed or realized his wife could not eat it. He was asking, in his own way, "Who will roll away the stone?" A friend stopped by and he happened to share his fear. The friend went home and told his wife. She smiled and got to work. Several women of the church agreed to help teach him to cook simple foods. They came and took him to the store to purchase the ingredients and then went back to his home to make soups and other dishes. He got quite proficient in the kitchen and it allowed them to stay in their home much longer than they had hoped. There was an answer, God was at work, but he was so focused on just what he could do that he never thought to expect God had a solution to his problem.

In Luke we have the women looking into the empty tomb when suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stand beside them. The men ask, "**Why do you look for the living among the dead?**" I see people, if not asking this question, mirroring the actions of the women who were presented with a message of new life but were still looking at the past. Think about people who have been fired from a job. They find a new job but all they can do is compare it to the one they lost. Or people who have lost a loved one and now nothing seems to bring them joy. The shadows of loss cast its spell over the present. Unfortunately we too often let the little mini deaths we have faced destroy the power of new life that is present today. We seem to think that if we work at it long enough, or go over it enough in our minds, that somehow we can resurrect that past event and make it live. But no, God is at work, transforming the here and now. We have to see where God is active currently and celebrate that creative process instead of looking for life amidst dead things.

We need to approach life like Eva. She was in my first congregation and taught me a lot about living and seeing the power of God in the now. I will always remember the phone call I received from her. She called to tell me she had gotten some good news. She had been to the doctor and had been told she had inoperable cancer and

had five years to live. I was left open mouthed. What do you say to such news? Then she laughed and said, Preacher, I am 90. I am going to die sometime. I have now been told when. The doctor assures me it is slow growing and won't affect me much for the next few years. The last year will be kind of tough but he promised me that he will take care of the pain. So you see. I have been given five years to live! And live she did. She had never flown because she was afraid. Now she flew because she was going to die anyway. She went and saw all of her grandchildren. She had been very frugal because she had to make her money last because she didn't know how much longer she had. Now she was much more generous because she knew. The doctor was right. She had four good years and a few months of struggle. When she checked into the hospital the last time her doctor told her it was time for the heavy duty pain meds that would probably knock her out. She wanted to see me one last time. Many of her children and grandchildren were with her. When I arrived she took my hand and said thanks and then beckoned me to bend down. I thought she was going to whisper something to me. Instead she gave me a big kiss, smiled and said, "See you in heaven," and indicated to the doctor to start the drip. Let us not look for life in its fullness in the midst of dead hopes and dreams but instead in the now, in what God is doing.

Finally, in John we have the same question asked by two different people. **"Woman, why are you weeping?"** The first was by the angels to Mary and then by Jesus with the further question **"Who are you looking for?"**

This is a question for all of us. We need to think about all of the things that cause us sadness. There is nothing wrong about those feelings and tears. I often say one of the consequences of loving someone is grieving for them when they are gone. You do not weep for those to whom you have no attachment. Grief and its friend, sadness, are a natural part of our life. The message of Easter does not eliminate those feelings. We should never be ashamed of them. But, as the scriptures say, we do not grieve without hope. Easter points us to that time beyond the now, the searing moments of loss to the future. In each of our lives Good Friday is a reality. Loss and death are mind numbing when they happen but we are prodded by the questions of Easter to look further, to a time beyond the pain. Unfortunately sometimes we weep and weep and refuse to move

on. Mary was fixated on finding her friend's body when he was standing before her. We too are promised a life full and rich with God. We need to ask not so much why we are weeping but more importantly ask, "Are we looking for the one who brings us life?"

I remember reading a story. She had experienced so much loss, her mother and father just a few months apart. Then she had been moved to a new unit at her job which she did not like and then her husband had informed her that he was filing for divorce. For the longest time she was paralyzed by the losses. She dragged herself to work, came home, turned off her phone and crawled into bed soon after eating her dinner and cried herself to sleep. One Saturday a friend came by, saw the mess that her apartment had become and said, "We are going out to lunch." She tried to refuse but her friend would not hear no. During lunch her friend asked her the question that changed her life. She said, "Are you going to cry over what was or look forward to what is?" It is the same question in a different way asked at the tomb. From that day forward she quit focusing on her loss and began to look for opportunities. She volunteered more at her church and in her community. She began to find things that excited her and at the time of writing the article was sharing how good life was. She had switched to a new job that she loved, she was in a committed relationship with a man who deeply loved her and she volunteered weekly at the care center where her parents had lived their last days as a way of saying thank you for their love.

All of us will face loss. But the Easter question of "Who are you looking for?" is still ours to answer. Are we seeking for meaning in the past, looking for life amongst the dead? Or, are we able to celebrate the new life that is offered to us today and every day? We are an Easter people. Let us live in the spirit and power of this day.