

What Not to Do on Easter Morning  
John 20:1-18  
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Thank God for those followers of Jesus who tried their hardest and best, and did well enough to keep the story alive and well for us today. They went to the tomb, they saw what had happened, they met Jesus, and they went to tell the story, and the rest, as they say, is history. They overcame their fears, risked being identified with a convicted and condemned criminal, and went out to spread the word. Would that we were so bold today.

But still, it took a little bit of God's grace to overcome some of their missteps so that they could share the Gospel. You see, even with their enthusiasm and their best efforts, they still almost missed the parade so to speak, although God probably would have found some other way to get them off on the right foot. But as the story goes, Jesus' followers make some flubs that we can learn from as we find ourselves called out for the same task. You see, the resurrection is all well and good, but if all we do with it is celebrate it once a year, it might as well be a fairy tale. If we are to live it, however, it means that we go forth with the story, as the disciples did. Going forth takes a lot of strength, a lot of courage, a lot of wisdom. Tonight's story offers us a glimpse at what not to do on Easter morning, that our efforts to share the resurrection might bring the results they deserve.

Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved make the first mistake. They get to the tomb, look inside for a moment and what do they do? They leave! They give up too soon, and go home, and do not receive the reward of seeing Jesus in those first moments! In their fear, their awe, their disappointment, their whatever, they leave the scene of the crime too soon, and so it falls to the more patient Mary to be the first witness to the resurrection. “But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” She stuck around, and saw not only the empty tomb, but the angels, and finally Jesus himself. But that kind of waiting can be hard. It can be risky. But it’s worth it.

You know the kind of waiting I’m talking about, don’t you? It’s the kind that Captain Kirk was so good at. In many an episode of the original Star Trek, there would be some risky endeavor for which Captain Kirk would volunteer himself, something like flying an explosive-laden shuttlecraft to the edge of an endangered planet’s atmosphere. And along the way, a crisis would evolve, putting Kirk in danger, and his crew would begin to freak out. And then Mr. Scott, the engineer would come on the com and say to Kirk, “Captain, you’re running out of time,” to which Kirk would reply, “Steady as she goes, Mr. Scott.”

And a little while later, Scotty would chime in again, “Captain, I really think you’d better beam out of there,” to which Kirk would reply, “Steady as she goes, Mr. Scott.”

Then the urgency in Scotty’s voice would rise, “But Captain, the dilithium crystals are disintegrating.” “Steady as she goes, Mr. Scott.”

“But, Captain, I don’t think I can hold it together much longer!” “Steady as she goes, Mr. Scott.”

And finally, the moment to bail out would arrive, and Kirk would say, “OK, beam me up Scotty...Scotty?... (with more urgency) Mr. Scott, now would be a good time...”

And all would turn out fine. Yes, Captain Kirk had the kind of patience to ride out a storm that would have benefited Peter and the other disciple.

For us, sticking around long enough can make all the difference for ourselves, and for others. When we stick with a situation, despite our discomfort, or our anxiety, or our disappointment, or even our boundless enthusiasm to tell someone some good news, there is a payoff. We get to see more, to see Jesus, so to speak. A friend tells us what is really going on, we get to say that goodbye we really need to say to someone who is dying, a wrongfully convicted prisoner is set free, we get to see a lunar eclipse. There are so many resurrection sights to behold if we can hold on, and stay in the moment long enough to see them.

Mary, bless her heart, offers a second “what not to do moment” when even though she sees Jesus, she fails to see Jesus for who he is and believes he is the gardener. Yes, to be fair to Mary, Jesus may have been holding out on revealing himself to her. And after all, what does a resurrection body really look like? It’s not like she had any experience seeing one before this. But at the same time, she

too had heard his predictions of being raised from the dead and it never occurred to her that she might see Jesus there. And so she didn't.

How often do we fail to see Jesus when he is standing right in front of us, maybe because we are not expecting him to be there, maybe because we think such and such place isn't holy enough for him to be present. But with eyes to see, Jesus is everywhere. One of my Facebook friends posted on Thursday night, "Jesus washed my feet tonight at Emmanuel Presbyterian Church. He looked like one of the beautiful widows in our congregation, but I know it was Him." This is someone who is aware of Christ in his midst. This is someone who knew what Mother Teresa was talking about. I know it's kind of old hat to quote Mother Teresa, but she saw things pretty clearly, didn't she? In whom did she see Jesus?

Jesus is the Hungry - to be fed.  
Jesus is the Thirsty - to be satiated.  
Jesus is the Naked - to be clothed.  
Jesus is the Homeless - to be taken in.  
Jesus is the Sick - to be healed.  
Jesus is the Lonely - to be loved.  
Jesus is the Unwanted - to be wanted.  
Jesus is the Leper - to wash his wounds.  
Jesus is the Beggar - to give him a smile.  
Jesus is the Drunkard - to listen to him.  
Jesus is the Mental - to protect him.  
Jesus is the Little One - to embrace him.  
Jesus is the Blind - to lead him.  
Jesus is the Dumb - to speak for him.  
Jesus is the Crippled - to walk with him.  
Jesus is the Drug Addict - to befriend him.  
Jesus is the Prostitute - to remove from danger and befriend her.  
Jesus is the Prisoner - to be visited.  
Jesus is the Old - to be served.

In a way, Mary was right to think Jesus was the gardener, right in the sense that Jesus can be seen in anyone for whom we take the time to really see them: for who God made them, for what their needs are, for what they have to offer us. Of course, Mary wasn't seeing Jesus in the gardener, but just seeing a person standing there who wasn't who she wanted to see standing there. But had she the eyes to truly see Jesus, even if he really were just a gardener, she would have seen Christ in him. And when we see Christ in someone else, we see Christ himself, and it gives us the opportunity to love and serve him, as well as the person in whose face we experience him.

Last but not least, Mary's reaction to Jesus was to want to hold on to him. To grab her precious friend and never let go. That specific act, the taking hold of Jesus' feet is not part of the story according John, though it appears in Matthew, but Jesus alludes to the inclination at least, when he says, "Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Again, Mary's desire is so perfectly normal, to want to reach out to hug him, and not let him get away again, not to see him put through the shame and suffering again. But there is so often something greater at stake than our wants, our desires. God's vision is bigger than ours. Jesus wants Mary to tell Peter and the other disciples what they were too impatient to see for themselves, that he is alive, not to keep him for herself. God wants Jesus ascended, and sitting at God's right hand, for reasons known only to the divine mind. But in her joy, how can Mary see all that?

Holding onto Jesus isn't the only posture that might not come recommended. I doubt God wants us swinging him like a club, or selling him like a sports car, or trying to put him on our sports team in the final minutes of the game when victory is on the line. I used to play on a church softball league, and before one game, the team asked if I would offer a prayer before the game started, because, you know, I was the pastor and all. And so I offered up a lovely prayer asking that we might all enjoy our pastime and have fun together, that no one would get hurt and that we'd all be good sports win or lose. And then we went out and lost the game like 22-1, and a couple of the guys came over after the game and said, "Pastor, please don't pray for us again unless you are going to pray for Jesus to give us the killer instinct."

Yes, we frequently invoke Jesus when we need him, and I suppose that is alright. But our prayers to him must be more than for our comfort. They must be for courage to stick our necks out on the line, for endurance for the conflict we will face for doing what is right, for challenge when we are becoming too complacent. The resurrected Jesus must be too much for us to handle, rather than too tame for us to mold and shape into a handleable toy or tool. And if letting Jesus run wild in your life means us loosening our grip on him, then for heaven's sake, let go, because life's a lot better when Jesus is holding you in his hands instead of you holding him in yours.

Thank God for you followers of Jesus who try your hardest and best, and do well enough to keep the story alive and well for generations to come. You overcome your fears, risk being identified with a convicted and condemned criminal, and go out to spread the word. And though you do it imperfectly, like Peter and Mary before you, fear not, there is still this good news this Easter evening: that if God can overcome death, God can overcome our imperfections! The reactions we've looked at tonight, the bailing out too soon to see Jesus, the looking past the Jesus in our midst, the keeping Jesus just for ourselves, they're all as normal as we are, and none of them ended the story. Resurrection isn't stopped so easily. But if resurrection really means new life, it means that God can overcome what's normal in us, and bring out what's best in us to bring life to the world: the patience to see the divine, the compassion to see Christ in everyone, and the generosity to share him with all who need to find the life he brings. May the power of God we see in raising Christ from the dead find its ways into our hearts and minds, this night, and forever more. Amen.