John 20:1-18

20Early 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 towards 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.

11 But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ 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.

“What Keeps Us Coming Here?”

Let’s be honest

How many of you like watching reruns? Think of some movie or an episode of a television show that you really like and tell me how many times you’ve watched it. Was there a favorite song you had as a teenager? I remember that I was twelve years old or so when I first heard *Stairway to Heaven.* Like most everyone I knew, I loved that song, and I would sometimes listen to it ten or more times a day. I’d call the local radio station and request it – and often be informed that it was already requested. I’d listen for hours with friends, and once we heard that familiar beginning, smiles would spread across our faces, someone would turn up the volume, and we’d either air-guitar or sing with Robert Plant. Eight minutes later (it’s a long song), we’d be singing that last line, and the joy would linger for awhile afterwards. Not all of you grew up with *Stairway to Heaven*; some of you may have had a similar experience with an Elvis Presley song, or even the Glen Miller orchestra. But you knew when the song started, everyone would be up and dancing. But after awhile, the thrill starts to wear off. Pretty soon you’re no longer calling the radio station to hear it. You may see your favorite movie so many times you’ve memorized the dialogue, but then the shelved the DVD or lend it to someone. The novelty has worn off. The thrill is gone.

Let’s face it; church services can be the same way. When it’s new to us, we may find it interesting, even fun. As a child you may have *enjoyed* going to church. But after awhile of hearing the same stories, singing the same hymns, saying the same prayers, seeing the same people, drinking the same coffee (in some churches I think they use the same coffee for several weeks), same sermon(!), you start to lose interest. Once a week becomes once a month becomes twice a year, and even the Christmas and Easter services, with all their decorations and flowers and children’s pageants and special music and choirs, they start to get boring. Even the excitement of a new church façade loses its pizzazz. And the stories of Jesus’ birth and death and resurrection get to be so familiar, like *Stairway to Heaven.* Eventually we lose interest in church no longer have any desire to hear those stories again. It’s like one comedian said: “George W. Bush has read the Bible twelve times. GET ANOTHER BOOK!” We’ve heard it all, and it just starts to repeat itself.

So some churches try new things – new music, small groups, new order of worship, new technology, even new “theology,” something that is more attractive to young adults or teenagers or children. Sometimes these changes succeed for awhile, like a remake of a great song, but ultimately those innovations lose their appeal, people grow tired of them, and then churches start desperately seeking for the next new thing.

What keeps us coming?

If we look at church as a form of entertainment, like a movie, or a song, you run into the same dead end. Even the best songs grow old. Even the best movies will bore us if we watch them too often. And all that we do to jazz it up, to remix it, to change the tempo or the actors or the background, will only interest us for a short while.

But not everyone loses interest in church. There are some who come week after week, who even come during the week, who attend Saturday worship services, Sunday worship services and all the special worship services, and to them it doesn’t matter about the order of worship, or who stands in the pulpit, or how poor the sermon is, they keep coming back. Are these people just gluttons for punishment? Do they just like listening to *Stairway to Heaven* over and over again?

The real reason these people I know come to church is because they have something in common with the people we read about this morning in our gospel lesson; John, Peter, and Mary. Let’s consider these three.

1. Knowing Christ’s love

First there is Mary. She is a woman who has had a troubled past; the Bible tells us that Jesus cast seven demons out of her – what these demons were or how they affected her we don’t know, but many believe she was the Mary who burst into a fancy dinner thrown by a dignitary, came over to Jesus and proceeded to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair,

creating quite a scene. Of Mary Jesus stated that she loves much because she has been forgiven much. She would stand by, watching Jesus die on the cross, among the few who were not frightened to show public affection for her teacher.

There is Peter, who, upon hearing from Mary that Jesus’ body has been taken from the tomb, *runs* to the garden. Peter was the first disciple to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Peter fell asleep while Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives on the night he was arrested. Peter, when identified as a follower of the condemned Jesus declared, “I don’t know him,” and then, realizing what he had done, went and wept bitterly. Peter, who unlike Judas, would not allow his own bitter failure to haunt him till death but *ran* to the cemetery, perhaps hoping that Jesus’ own prediction about his resurrection had come true and he will be able to say how sorry he is for his shameful behavior.

And then there is John. John simply refers to himself as “the one whom Jesus loved.” John certainly didn’t believe that he was the *only* one whom Jesus loved, and he certainly had his own confession to make as he too fell asleep while Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives. But John knew Jesus’ love for him was real and unlike any other love he could have known. Because of Jesus’ love, John felt very special.

Yes, love of Jesus is what Mary and Peter and John had in common. Not perfect love, but love that *knew what perfect love was.* Love that knew God’s forgiving grace. They really knew Jesus, and thus longed to be in his presence. Some of us come to church to find that kind of love. But too often we find judgment. We find criticism. We find rejection in subtle ways. We feel that someone is ignoring us. Someone else is talking about us. We may come to church excitedly, like Peter and John and Mary came to the Garden on that Easter morning only to find no Jesus, nothing but an empty tomb and a few sheets, and we may go home disappointed.

1. Knowing Christ is alive

If the story had ended with the empty tomb, with Peter and John going home, with Mary left bewildered and crying in the garden, that would have been the end of it. Like anyone, they would have mourned their loss and gone back to life as usual, or as usual as life could be having lost one so loving, kind, caring. Had the story ended here, Mary and the disciples may have come together for several years to remember the loss of their good friend and teacher, but we would not be gathered here today. This service is not a memorial service for a good man who died unjustly. This is not a service to commemorate someone who was greatly loved and tragically killed. Today, and every Sunday we celebrate what Paul Harvey refers to as “the rest of the story.”

Mary stood there outside the tomb, sobbing, then looking inside saw angels who asked here, “Why are you weeping?” She gives the answer: “They have taken my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid him.” Then from behind her, a man she assumes to be the gardener asks the same question; “Woman, why do you weep?” The most Mary can hope is that this man, presumably the gardener, knows where Jesus’ body has been taken, and so she pleads, “If you have taken the body, please tell me where it is, and I will take care of burying Jesus.”

Then with one simple word, everything became clear. Jesus said, “Mary,” and everything changed.

But that is certainly not the only reason we come here on Sundays and some come on Saturdays and some at 6 a.m. and some to Bible Studies and Prayer Groups and workshops and seminars. The fact that Jesus is alive is not enough to warrant us coming to church – we could just wait until he goes on tour and buy tickets. It’s what Jesus says next that clues us in on the real reason many of come here: “Mary.” We don’t come on Easter or any other Sunday just to recognize that Jesus is alive. **We come because he has called us…by name.** Arlene…Wally…Greg…Gloria…Shannon... We have heard his calling, and we come together to celebrate together.

1. Knowing that Christ can be found in others.

But we don’t always recognize Jesus, do we? Like Mary, we can be standing right in front of him and we won’t even know it until he calls us by name. And we may be shocked that the one speaking is him. We have that image of Jesus, the good shepherd, long hair, white robe, maybe a halo. Today’s reading says that Mary turned around and *saw Jesus standing there* but didn’t know who he was. It wasn’t a problem of bad eye sight. It was just now how she expected Jesus to look. Francis of Assisi relates a story of how he met Jesus once along a road. Francis, for all his qualities, had a fear of lepers. The disease was contagious and could lead to a horrible death, so he preferred to avoid lepers. But one day he saw a man, skin ashen white yet hiding his face, on the narrow path he was on. At first Francis shuddered in disgust and fear, but then he rallied himself, ran forward, put is arms around the man, greeted him with a customary kiss, then moved on. A moment later he looked back and saw no one there. All his remaining days, Francis was sure that it was Christ himself who he had met on that path. We never know how Jesus will appear to us, perhaps as one we would resist or avoid, one of “the least of these.”

The Take Home

So we come full circle; Christ receives us, forgives us, *loves* us though we don’t deserve it AND Christ comes to us in the lives of those we find hardest to receive, hardest to forgive, and hardest to love. We have the extraordinary privilege of bringing Christ’s love to others, and when we do so, we are surprised to find that others bring Christ’s love to us. And the church is where this mixture of loved and loving, received and receiving, forgiven and forgiving, come together to worship and serve God. We worship because we are loved and forgiven and therefore able to share in Christ’s resurrection, and that is indeed a reason to celebrate.

I’ll end with a story that a pastor shared with me. There was a woman who started attending his church, and after every service she would tell the pastor and fellow parishioners what a wonderful worship service it was. Regardless of how poorly the music was played, how boring the sermon was, this woman was always glowing after the worship service and sharing her joy with others. One Sunday, the organist was sick and there were no hymns sung. The pastor shared a particularly dull sermon that day, and many people were grateful when the service was finally over. Yet this woman again shared with the pastor and the parishioners what a wonderful worship service it was. One parishioner was annoyed with this woman, thinking that she was being insincere, and asked the woman, “How can you say that today’s worship service was wonderful? We has no music and the sermon was awful!”

The woman responded, “I came to worship God, and that’s what I did. The music and the sermon are not important. I always have a wonderful time worshiping the God I love!”

 If you have found church uninspiring, re-examine God’s love for you in Christ. Let that love transform you into an enthusiastic worshiper!