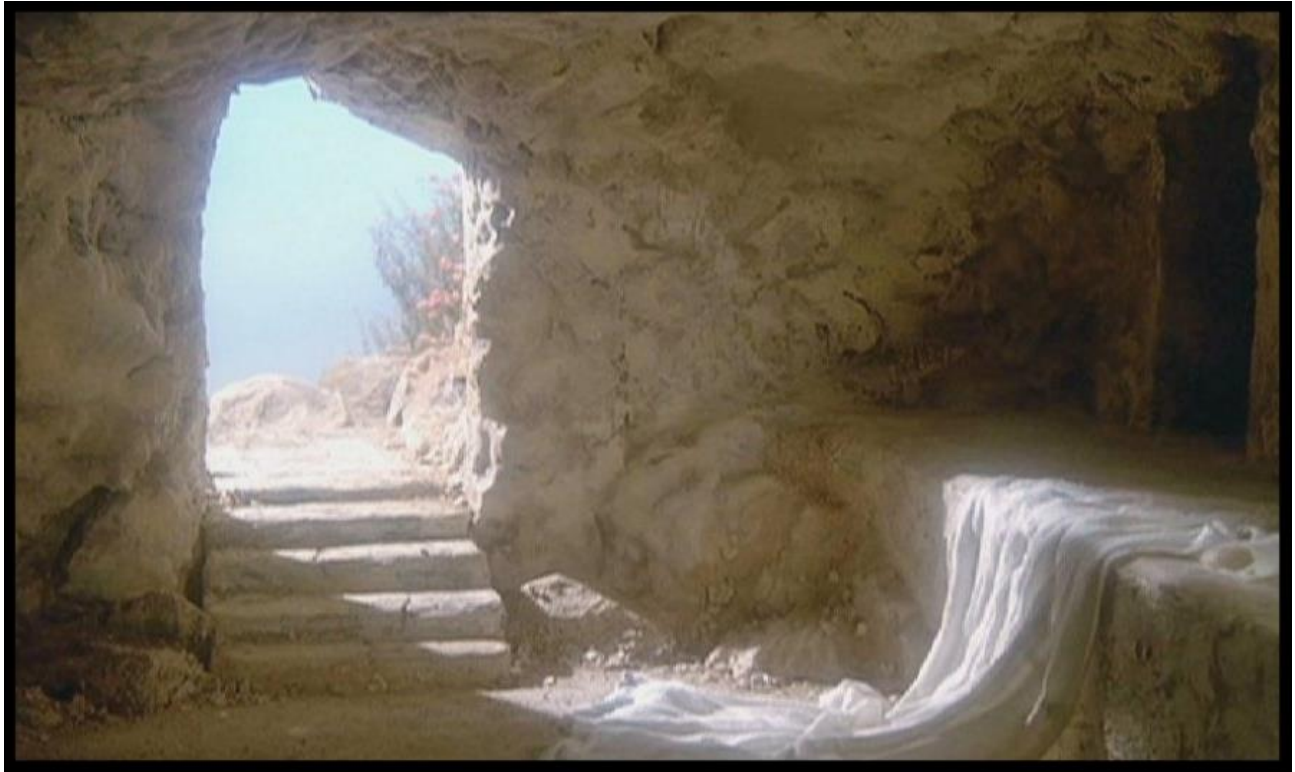


## Looking On From A Distance



Mark 16:1 "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus."

This is the first of a series of seven sermons that I will be preaching all this Easter season on the "Witnesses to the Resurrection." The stories of those witnesses are scattered throughout the Easter Season readings over our three year lectionary cycle, so that we never hear all the stories in a single year. With the Bishop's permission, I am this year incorporating all those Scriptural witnesses into a single season, so that we can all look at their stories carefully together. Many

of them are familiar to us, like the appearance to Mary Magdalene or the Doubting Thomas, but some may be less so, like the appearance to Jesus' brother James or to the crowd of five hundred people at one time. Each of the stories tells us something about the nature of the Resurrection and each of the stories tells us something about the kinds of responses the disciples had to this dramatic event. It is my hope that we should be able to see something of ourselves in their stories. So let us begin.

The principal characters on that first Easter Sunday morning so long ago were, of course, the women. This particular group of women is first mentioned together in last week's Gospel reading where it reports that: "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow (Jesus)," we are told, "and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem." Their presence being noted there on the hill of Calvary, as Jesus was being crucified, is the first time any of them are actually named, these women who have been providing for Jesus for some time now.

But where are the men in this picture? Where are the Twelve Apostles? For they seem to have all abandoned Jesus by this point in the story. Most of the men it seems scattered Thursday night at the first sign of trouble, fleeing from the Garden of Gethsemane

when Judas and the angry mob arrived from the high priest's house carrying clubs and swords. Peter lingered behind at the high priest's courtyard for a while, but ended up running away in shame after three times denying even knowing Jesus. Judas later hanged himself in despondency. By the time of Jesus' trial before Pilate, the faces of Jesus' male disciples are no longer seen in the crowd, nor are their strong voices heard opposing the shouts of the others to crucify Jesus. For the male disciples of Jesus, we are told again and again, were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities.

Thus along the way of the cross to Calvary, it is the face of Veronica and the women of Jerusalem we see, not Peter or James or John. The only male named on the road to Calvary is Simon of Cyrene, an African stranger from out of town, a passer-by forced to carry Jesus' cross when Jesus' strength failed. The unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved is noted as being present briefly at the cross, but he is soon sent away with Jesus' mother.

So as Jesus died there on the cross, only these women from Galilee were mentioned, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. But are these women paradigms of piety to inspire us in our witness, in our struggle with the Resurrection? I don't think so. For there is a phrase in each of the gospel stories of this scene that haunts me, and suggests to me a tentativeness in their presence. The Gospel writer Luke tells us

that the women who were at Calvary 'stood at a distance watching these things.' The Gospel writer Mark tells us that these women 'were looking on from afar.' Matthew writes that 'they were watching from a distance.' Each writer has different words that say the same thing. But that isn't how we usually imagine the scene. In medieval paintings, the women are usually pictured literally at the foot of the cross, close enough to kiss Jesus' feet or collect his sacred blood. In more recent cinematic portrayals, the women are usually represented at the front of the crowd surrounding the crucifixion, weeping and wailing loudly, struggling against the Roman guards to draw closer. But that isn't what the Gospel writers tell us happened. They tell us that these women stood at a distance, watching from afar. For these women, those who we are told once followed Jesus in Galilee and provided for him there, appear now only as detached observers, passive onlookers at the back of the crowd, keeping a safe distance away, watching from afar.

And they appear to be still keeping that distance when Jesus was buried. For we are told that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid, these women who had come with Jesus from Galilee saw the tomb where the corpse was buried, but they didn't take part in the burial. Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, is the one who went boldly to Pilate to ask for his body, who with Nicodemus then

wrapped it in a linen cloth, and buried it in a new tomb hewn from the rock. Again the women are named as being there, 'sitting opposite the tomb', looking on from afar again, observing from a distance.

It is not until Easter Sunday morning that these women seem to get up enough courage to act, to do something, to draw closer, to get involved in what was happening, and become something more than passive observers watching from a distance. For on that first day of the week, after the Sabbath had ended, they rose very early that morning so as to buy spices that they might go and anoint the body of Jesus. However the Fourth Gospel tells that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had already wrapped Jesus' body with spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds, we are told. I presume that the women were too far away to see clearly what had been done by the others at his burial on Friday. Thus now, on this first Easter Sunday morning, they are finally drawing nearer; they are at last getting involved.

And as Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome approached the tomb that Easter Sunday morning they found it perplexingly opened, the stone rolled away. When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. The women were clearly not expecting this. The meaning of the empty tomb was not immediately apparent to these women. They were not presuming a

Resurrection; they were simply wanting to finish the hurried burial preparations. And thus these confused and bewildered women become the first witnesses to the reality of the Resurrection, as the angelic messenger then said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

The women's response to all of this, however, is perhaps surprising. Instead of going forth to the disciples as we might expect, as they were instructed to do, to proclaim to the disciples and Peter that Jesus had been raised from the grave and will see them in Galilee, the women, we are told, flee from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they were afraid. They say nothing to anyone. They tell no one. That is the end of the story. Indeed, that is the end of Mark's Gospel in the most ancient manuscripts of the text we have. There is no appearance of the Resurrected Jesus in the original ending of Mark's Gospel, believed to be the earliest of the Gospels, a fact which so distressed later scribes and copyists that no less than four other endings to this Gospel were added in later manuscripts, and you'll probably find one or two of those in your Bible, but they weren't originally there. Sure later Luke and Matthew and the Fourth Gospel tell a different story, adding Resurrection

appearances for these women. But in the most ancient texts of the Gospel of Mark, there is only the empty tomb, and the angelic messenger, and his declaration of the Resurrection, his declaration that God had raised Jesus from the dead, and his command then to these women to go and tell the others. And what do the women do? They flee and say nothing. Whew, what a story!

And sadly, there is an obvious parallel, I think, between those women and us, those women who appear on the scene only after the crucifixion, who observe his death only from afar, without having become really involved, even in his burial. Like those women, we are often well intentioned in our connection with Jesus, financially supporting his ministry in Galilee, but still we keep our distance in Jerusalem, we stay somewhat away from the madding crowd, we hold ourselves back. Such that like those women, after we discover the empty tomb and hear the proclamation of the Resurrection and receive the angelic commission to proclaim to others what has become of Jesus, we too often fail, we too often run away afraid and confused, and we too often say nothing to anyone at all about what we have discovered. When we are confronted with the reality of the Resurrection, with that which was not what we were expecting, we often become like those women, full of terror and amazement, and withdraw again to a comfortable distance, we become again passive observers looking on from afar. Not even the empty tomb and an angelic declaration of the

Resurrection guarantees true faith in Jesus' followers. Not even the empty tomb and an angelic declaration of the Resurrection guarantees that they or we will understand or believe what has happened.

Oh, yes later these women are seen again in the background as active members of the early church. But they are first a testimony to us that the reality of the Resurrection may not be appropriated into our lives easily; that the reality of the Resurrection may not be appropriated into our lives unless we have worked through our fears and our confusion, unless we have struggled with our expectations and the differing realities we discover. And this is a struggle that we can't be done alone. This is a struggle that we the followers of Jesus must engage in together, just like those early disciples, just like those women, even if we must do so behind closed doors, in fear.

And so you too at this Easter celebration are invited to get involved in this story, to become something more than passive observers who look on from a distance. You too are invited to enter the empty tomb with those women, to hear the message of the angel, and to be confused and afraid with them. But I encourage you that when you have done so that you do not retreat back to a comfortable distance, but that you stay with us, together in this community of faith, to struggle and work with each other through our fears and confusions, to understand what this all means to us,



to make sense of the Resurrection, to become something more than a gathering of Jesus disciples, something more than those 'who used to follow Jesus and provided for him when he was in Galilee,' and to become instead a part of the community of the resurrection, to become instead the Church, those who go out together into the world and boldly that proclaim the good news: Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. AMEN.