

C Easter 4.21.19

John 20:1-18

Focus Statement: Jesus loves us to The End.

On Good Friday I talked about how in the Maundy Thursday reading, John chapter thirteen said that Jesus loved his own to the end, and that the Passion story from John shows us not what the end looks like, but what love looks like. Well guess what friends, this morning we get to see what the end looks like; what it means to be loved to the end.

So to recap, what's been happening these past few days in John's Gospel has been rough, to say the least. John thirteen to seventeen was Jesus's final good-bye to his followers and if you love a good love note, oh man, it's beautiful. Then we get to chapter eighteen where one of those same followers whom Jesus loved so much, betrayed him into the hands of the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. Jesus was questioned by Pilate, beaten, mocked, and hung on a cross, abandoned by all but a handful of his followers, his mother, his mother's sister Mary, and Mary Magdalene. He declared "It is finished" and died, and his body was gathered not by one of his closed followers but by Joseph of Arimathea, who'd followed Jesus in secret and laid him in a tomb in which no one had been laid.

The story of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and crucifixion is a story of love, a story of what it means to love. Jesus said at one point there is no love greater than to lay down one's life for one's friends, and that is what we saw Jesus doing in the long hours of Thursday night into Friday, laying down his life for us and for all of humanity, whom Jesus called friends. When I tell the Passion according to John, I stage it so that Jesus is always in the center of the scene and the other action is taking place around him. This is because as chaotic as it must

have felt for the disciples, the crowd, and even for Pilate, the narrative described Jesus as totally in control. The soldiers in the garden followed his command to leave his followers alone; he was handed off to Pilate to fulfill how he said he was to die. Pilate tried to question him and ended up being questioned himself, Peter denied just as Jesus had predicted, the soldier who crucified him divided his clothes as the scripture had described. He drank wine, his legs weren't broken, and his side was pierced, all as the scripture said.

The passion of Jesus is the story of love, of God's love for the world, of Jesus' love for us, a story about a love so deep it will go to death and beyond. Jesus' death was not payment, it is gift. At the very beginning of John's Gospel, John the Baptist called Jesus, "the Lamb of God!" I wonder if these words were ringing in the disciples ears as Jesus was dying on the day of Preparation for the Passover, the day the Passover lambs would be killed. This is important because the reason the Jewish people celebrate Passover is because it is a reminder of God's love for them, a reminder that when they were slaves in Egypt, God led them from that slavery into freedom. Jesus' death is about granting the whole world freedom, not from a corrupt Pharaoh but from sin and death itself. And this gift of love was given not to a world who was praising and united, but to a broken, hurt, scared one. Judas betrayed, Jesus washed his feet and then died for him. Peter denied, Jesus washed his feet and died for him. The whole crowd of followers either fell away quietly or joined the mob shouting for his crucifixion yet to the cross and beyond Jesus went for them also, because love, God's love, is unconditional. Jesus died for us not because of who we are, but because that is the kind of love Christ has for us. The kind of love that cannot be stopped by

anything. The kind of love that conquers death. When Jesus “loved them to the end” this is the kind of love that was.

But that was Friday. This is Sunday, and now we get to see what the end looks like. “Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.” We don’t know why she came that morning, what brought her out so early.

Maybe she heard Jesus’ promise to love them to the end, and now after what so clearly had to have been the end, his end, she came to demonstrate that her own love too would last to her end.

Whatever brought her there, after the end, when she arrived she saw that the stone had been rolled away, and the body of Jesus was no longer there. As she stood weeping outside the tomb, she was approached by a man whom she assumed, being in a garden early in the morning, must be a gardener.

Now I want to pause here for a moment and point out an interesting similarity. The Gospel of John starts out with the phrase “In the beginning...” and now, at the end, we’re in a garden. Can you think of another Bible story that starts “In the beginning...” and ends up in a garden? The creation story. In the beginning, the book of Genesis begins, God created a whole bunch of things, day and night, the land and the sea, the sun and the moon and stars, birds, and fish, and animals. And then God created man, who ends up with the name Adam, a shortening of the Hebrew Adama, the name for the dirt from which he was formed. And from Adam, God made woman, in Hebrew ishshah, so called because the word is a play on

ish, the Hebrew word for man. The point is, naming occurs. These new creations are named, man and woman, Adam and Eve, and tasks are given. They are to have stewardship over creation, to care for all that God has made, all that God has called good.

This, if you remember, didn't end well. The serpent came and tricked them into eating what they should not eat, sin entered the world, and man and woman, Adam and Eve, were forced to leave the garden and toil, until they reached the end and return to the ground, for "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Time past, Adam and Eve had children, and their children had children, and their children had children. Nations rose and fell, kings and emperors came and went, tens of thousands of years of time passed and now we find ourselves with a woman in a garden again. Only this time, the story ends differently.

So Mary stood weeping in the garden, when a man she supposed to be a gardener approached her and said, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She looked at Jesus, but didn't recognize him to be Jesus and said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." To which Jesus said a single word, "Mary." Her name. And out the sound of her name, when he named her again, she recognized him and replied, Teacher. And just as had happened so very many years before, Jesus sent Mary out of the garden. The difference though, in this time after the end, was that Jesus sent Mary out not as punishment but with a mission. "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Go and make known to them that the end was not the end, it was only the beginning.

John chapter thirteen said Jesus loved his disciples to the end. On the cross we saw what loves looks like. At the empty tomb and in the resurrected Jesus we see what the end looks like, and what it looks like is life. In the resurrection of Jesus we see the end for what it truly is, not an end at all but the beginning of all that is to come. There is no end of Christ's love for us, because beyond the end there still is Jesus, calling us by name and sending us out. Thanks be to God. Amen.