

Sermon on Easter Sunday 20th April 2014

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Text: John 20, 11 – 18

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed!

This joyous Easter message is being spread all over the world today in all continents, in Europe, America, Africa, Asia, Australia, in Germany, in the Commonwealth, in Ethiopia, in Ghana. People all over the world are being reassured today: Never will there be a situation without hope. God is able to create new hope and even new life where despair or death seem to prevail!

As to the Bible and its New Testament: This global and astonishing good news is told in all four gospels and was soon spread all over the world at that time. The circumstances of the Easter events and in particular the exact circumstances of the resurrection, however, are reported differently in each gospel. Matthew differs from Mark or Luke, and John's gospel, that we are going to look at today, tells yet another story.

Let's therefore have a closer look at John's story now. It starts with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb very early in the morning. When she sees that the stone has been removed from the entrance she turns on her heel and runs to Simon Peter and another disciple: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" In no way is there any kind of thought of a resurrection or the like; on the contrary, the only possibility Mary could imagine was that somebody had stolen the corpse. Peter and the other disciple don't hesitate and rush to the tomb together with Mary. They even look into the burial chamber but can see nothing but strips of linen lying there. So the two men turn and go back home again.

It is striking that all this is told completely unemotionally and totally focused on facts. It's typical for men, isn't it? They usually look for facts. When facts don't make sense, they move on and continue doing what's demanded of them next. Why do men do that? Why are we as men, of course not always, but quite often focused on facts and the sheer realities? For sure, that is important, too, but don't we often miss the actual melody of life by reacting like this? Peter and the other disciple even miss the most important turning point in history by reacting as they did! Mary doesn't. She doesn't run away again. She stays. Women are often stronger when it comes to facing one's own doubts or fears. Women often see deeper. They follow their hearts, and by doing so all of a sudden life in its fullness is revealed to them. By facing the shock and the absurdity of the empty tomb Mary is the first to learn about the impossibility and yet reality of the resurrection. It is one of the most moving encounters of the New Testament that John tells us about. I will read it out to you again in several parts and make some comments in between.

After the two men went back home again John continues as follows:

Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away", she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

Let's become aware of this: Easter doesn't start with triumphant shouts of joy. It starts with crying. Mary stands there crying, giving free rein to her grief and despair.

There are some religious groups or esoteric movements nowadays which almost ignore pain or suffering. Think positive, search for the good and beautiful and everything will be all right, that's their message. People who are trying to follow these rules frequently fail in their attempt to a perfect life and sometimes even fall into depression. Everybody, however, knows that the reality of life is different, even at Easter. Even at Easter there are people with a broken heart. They have lost a loved one and feel the loneliness all the harder on a festive occasion like this. Others are oppressed by the daily burdens, by too much work at home or in the office or by unemployment or by poverty. Some start wondering what life is all about. And at Easter, too, people die in road accidents or in countries where there is unrest or even war. The Christian belief, contrary to most other religious movements, is rather down-to-earth and realistic. Christians, too, of course, experience happiness and joy, but they do not deny pain and suffering. As a matter of fact, Easter, the feast of joy, starts exactly at this point. Mary stands there crying. Not much wonder. She had had a special relationship to Jesus. He had freed her from evil spirits. She had withdrawn from prostitution to become one of the most faithful followers of Jesus. She had set all her hopes on Jesus who she expected to be the coming Messiah. And now this. Not only had he died on the cross but now he had also been stolen out of the tomb. She had no longer a place to go to in her grief. Mary felt she was falling into a bottomless pit. How important it is to have a place for one's grief. How hard it is when graves are unknown or far away in foreign countries.

But Mary is not completely on her own. Two angels are in the burial chamber. Angels are messengers of God. Whenever heaven and earth touch angels are involved and God is at hand. This is the case until today. Just think of somebody who, maybe unexpectedly, offers you their help in a predicament. "You are an angel", we say. It is as if God himself has touched us with his love and grace. It's similar with Mary. "Woman, why are you crying?" the angels say. - How comforting it is, isn't it, when somebody addresses me when I am mourning or in despair. It allows me to start to let go or even get rid of what is burdening me. "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."

At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman", he said, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" Thinking

he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her: "Mary." She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not returned to the Father."

It's not more than just two words: "Mary" and "Rabboni". And all of a sudden there is Easter, all at once, against all expectation. - I wonder what was going on inside Mary. How was she feeling? This can't be true. Am I dreaming? Is it really him?

That's what resurrection is about: Not a spectacular public demonstration, no turnaround of the world through a great Godly miracle, neither a dogmatic teaching. No, rather in the quietness and twilight of a dawning day, in two people meeting, that's where new life starts and where the breakthrough to a new world happens. Before that, Mary was numbed with grief. Her sorrow blurred her sight. She sees, but she does not perceive Jesus, rather thought it was the gardener. But then he calls her by her name: "Mary". Was it the familiar sound of his voice? May be, but I believe there was more to it. It is like the calling of one's name when we baptize a child or an adult. There is more to it than the sound of the name. God calls you by your name meaning: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine* (Isaiah 43, 1). Most of us were probably baptized as babies. Of course we then were not aware of this. But through your baptism God has created in you an inseparable and distinctive relationship to him. You have been given an unmistakable value and dignity. Maybe you remember this next time when somebody calls you by your name. God, too, has called you by this very name, and he remembers your name and knows you even if others should ignore you or even threaten to belittle you. You are God's precious child! God calls you by your name like Jesus called Mary by her name. By doing so he called her back to life again.

Mary, however, was not able to grasp fully the meaning of her meeting with the risen Christ, how could she have? "Rabboni", she answered, addressing him as teacher, because Jesus was a Jewish teacher, a rabbi, during his life. Mary therefore addresses him with words of the past and is mistaken by this. She thinks that Jesus has just turned back from death and will continue to be a teacher. That's probably one of the reasons why she wants to touch him. But Jesus rejects her intention. "Do not hold on to me", "do not touch me", which means: You can't examine or prove that I am risen. The whole encounter with the risen Christ is, up until today, beyond any demonstrable proof. "Do not hold on to me", that also points to the fact, that Jesus' body is of another kind, a kind which belongs not only to this world but also to the other world. It is a world where there are no graves anymore and where God himself will "wipe every tear from their eyes" as is promised in the book of Revelation (chapter 21, 4).

But this new world, the kingdom of God, is not far any more, on the contrary, through the risen Christ it stands right next to you.

There is yet another part of our story which is inextricably interwoven with the resurrection. It is Jesus' command to go out into the world and witness to what Jesus has done and taught, not to serve death but to proclaim life.

At the end of our text Jesus says to Mary: "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

It is noteworthy that Mary does not summon the disciples to go to the tomb again. I had already mentioned that the empty tomb does not suffice as proof of the resurrection, neither for Mary nor for Peter and the other disciple nor for us today. You don't fathom the meaning of the resurrection for your own life or for this world when you try to continuously do research on whether the tomb was empty or not or whether it would be biologically or scientifically thinkable.

Let's rather take Mary as an example. She goes and proclaims. After being paralyzed by pain and grief she is given the power to move again as if chains had fallen off her. Easter liberates you for new hope. Life can start anew! You cannot experience this, however, by running away thinking: How terrible! Or: Nothing can be done about it anyway. But when you face the predicament, when you remain open to the power of the Holy Spirit in spite of all obvious hopelessness, when you remain patient and prepared to let yourself be found and spoken to: "Mary", then resurrection happens. It doesn't have to be at Easter. It can happen any day or night. It happens when God touches your life and gives you new hope and new courage. How wonderful: God has called me by my name. I belong to him and he belongs to me. He will stay with me and he will send me out: Like Mary I am to become an angel, a messenger of the good news.

And don't forget: Easter starts with crying, but the laughing and the joy of the angels can already be heard in all crying. It is the laughing of those who have overcome all trials and tribulations and been liberated from all grief, anxieties and worries. Death has lost its sting! Life has won the victory.

And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding may bless and preserve you in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, Amen.