

## **From Tears to Joy – From Sorrow to Service**

Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

UMC Geneva IL

Cash Godbold! Now that's a great name for a missionary, isn't it! Cash, because every missionary I've ever known has been strapped for cash. And Godbold. Being a son of missionaries myself, I know that missionaries are bold for God, aren't they? Otherwise, I doubt they'd be missionaries. Cash and Ann Godbold were missionaries in the Sahara Desert of West Africa. They ministered among that fiercely independent tribe of nomads known as the Tuareg. Camping out of their four wheel drive Land Rover, the Godbolds would travel about the Sahara Desert in the Niger Republic and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ at various campsites where the Tuareg would gather for periodic meetings.

As a missionary, you never know what you will face on any given day, and one day Cash received a rather strange request. He was told that an American Peace Corps volunteer traveling on a market truck along the edge of the desert had suddenly died. Since this was a predominately Muslim area, our Muslim friends were afraid to touch this young man's body for fear of violating Christian burial customs in some way. Well, as any good missionary would do, Cash responded immediately and made his way to the village where the young man's body lay. And there, he learned the details of the story. This young Peace Corps worker, who had given his life to help the people of Niger Republic, happened to suffer an asthma attack while riding in the back of a jam packed market truck. With all the sand and dust swirling around him in the back of that loaded truck, he simply suffocated.

And so Cash Godbold quickly and lovingly went about the task of washing and bathing this young man's body. Since temperatures easily reach into the 120's in that part of the world, he needed to move quickly. After washing the body, he carefully wrapped it in linen and prepared it for the flight back to the United States for proper burial, all the while thinking of this young man's family and the pain and loss that they must be feeling.

In our lectionary reading today from John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene is also preoccupied with a body - the body of Jesus. Finding the empty tomb does not prod her to faith, but rather makes her anxious and worried about what had become of Jesus's corpse. Mary's consternation is natural. She has come to the

tomb early, perhaps for a time of private grieving...for beginning the slow, painful process of coming to grips with the absence of the one she deeply loves. But the removal of the stone and the empty tomb disrupt her and only create fear and frustration. Logically, her mind moves to the conclusion that someone has taken Jesus's body.

When faced with that open tomb, Mary functions as a reasonable, sane character. In spite of her grief, she arrives at the only conclusion a person in her—and our—right mind would conclude. Dead bodies don't simply disappear. Someone has to move them. In short, in a world of cause and effect...in a world of established rules as to what can happen and how...in a closed universe that allows only for the old and familiar to recur, Mary Magdalene's logic is right on target: Find the body and get on with the grieving. But guess what! Mary's closed world...and ours...is broken open when Jesus calls her by name. Something illogical, impossible, even unnatural occurs. The One who was earlier certified as dead now greets Mary. The old established rules of what can happen and how are overthrown. In today's modern sociological jargon, the old plausibility structure is shattered and left in shambles. A new day has dawned!

You see, the Risen Jesus cannot be controlled, even by Mary Magdalene's loving concern for him. The voice of Jesus calling her name shatters her customary world. A world that left no room for resurrection. Jesus's voice shatters that old world and opens up a brand-new future. What she is told to do is to grieve no longer, but instead go to the disciples with the Gospel...the Good News that the Lord had risen from the dead. And so Mary's journey on that first Easter morning is a journey that takes her from sorrow to service. From tears of depression to words of devotion. From blindness and inability to perceive Jesus to a fresh vision of the Risen Lord. From a focus on self to a new focus on others and mission and ministry in the world, as she obeys Christ's command and goes to tell others of her Easter experience!

Tears on Easter morning. Yes, sometimes deep emotion blinds us to the presence of Jesus. Deep depression and sorrow can blind us, can't it. I've experienced it in my own life and have seen it in the lives of others. As that old Kenny Rogers song goes, "Life can deliver a shock that will shiver, a blow to deliver, that knocks you to your knees." Ever been knocked to your knees? This past year with the pandemic, and the chaos and crisis accompanying it in so many areas of life, has

certainly knocked many of us to our knees. Yes, deep emotion can blind us to the presence of the Risen Christ. So sad we do not see him!

Likewise, deep anger can blind us to the Lord's presence. So mad we do not see him! Mad over the loss of a loved one...the loss of a job...a career...not being with family and grand-children. Mad over the loss of one's health. Anger, at times, can blind us to the presence of Jesus in our lives. But deep joy can also blind us to the Lord's presence. So glad that we do not see him! Yes, sometimes success can be our own worst enemy. We can get so wrapped up in doing well and accomplishing our goals and accumulating things and honors and prestige that, all of a sudden, we become blind, unable to see the Risen Christ in our midst.

Deep emotions...So sad, so mad, so glad...that we fail to see that Jesus, the Risen Christ, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is in our midst. This Easter morn, dare we be like Mary Magdalene, blurting out our grief and pain, willing to bring our partial knowledge and partial faith – no matter how small it may be – to the Lord? Blurting! I like that word. Blurting out our pain, our sorrow, our intense emotions can help us come to faith...grow in faith. I believe that those who speak what is on their mind and ask questions of Jesus have the possibility of coming to a new perspective, of catching a fresh glimpse of the Risen Christ of having an Easter experience with the Lord.

The good news is that if Mary Magdalene can start by thinking that the resurrected Jesus was a gardener and yet receive knowledge and comfort, so too can we start with our fears and misperceptions and yet arrive at proclaiming the Good News that Jesus is alive and at work in our lives and our world. On this Easter Sunday, may we like Mary Magdalene hear the Lord afresh, see the Lord anew, and proclaim his resurrection story once again. Amen!

Rev. Rich Darr, ThD  
Sr. Pastor – UMC Geneva