

“Three People We Know”
John 20:1-18
March 27, 2016 Sunrise Service
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

This is a story about three people, three people that I think we know. Peter, John and Mary. Not quite a folk singing group but familiar characters none the less. In John's account of the Easter story, these are the three people we meet at the empty tomb. The first two are Peter and John. When they hear that the body is gone, they have to go see for themselves. Are you like that? When someone tells you something, do you have to go see for yourself? Dad, the car has a flat tire—you go look. Your wife tells you that something has gone wrong around the house—do you believe her, or do you first have to go look for yourself before you really believe? Maybe it's a guy thing—we have to see for ourselves. Peter and John have to see for themselves. And so do they walk together out toward the garden tomb to see? Of course not, they have to run, they have to race, they don't want the other one to get there first. John arrives first, but is hesitant to go in, but not Peter, he's excited about the possibility and so he goes right in to see for himself. But it is John who believes right away. John instantly believes. It is John who is so ready to believe the best about everyone. We know people like him in the church. These are the people who see the kids running through the church having lost their shoes somewhere along the way and they say, “Isn't it great that the kids feels so comfortable in church!” These are the people who see the mess that is in the back of the church and see it as an opportunity for a work day this spring and won't it be great to have a service project where we can fellowship with each other. For some of us, John's endless optimism is incredibly annoying and we think he constantly refuses to face facts, but I think that inwardly we cheer for him and all those like him. He is so ready to believe the good news when we are full of doubts that he often pulls us along when our faith is dragging.

But we also know guys like Peter. In fact, maybe a lot of us are like Peter. We're just not sure. Actually we are sure one moment and less sure the next. Peter is racing toward the tomb, trying to catch up with John. Why was he running toward the tomb? He's spent the last few days running

away from Jesus. Remember that he was there in the upper room the night of the last supper, swearing that even though everyone else might desert Jesus, he—Peter, his best friend, would never fall away. And Jesus tells him that the cock will not crow that day until he swears again, three times that he doesn't even know who Jesus is. And so Peter runs away. Until today when he runs toward him—perhaps thinking that he might get a second chance, but his rational mind is telling him that it is too good to be true. He starts, he stops. He runs toward him, he runs away. He believes, he doubts. He is sure, he has no idea. He's like a lot of us. “Many of us live with Peter in this complex of emotions. We harbor petty jealousies in our souls for those who seem so blessed by the love of God, so full of confidence and joy. We are resentful of the success of others. Or we promise ourselves that we will not fall away from whatever God has given us to do, but the minute we are threatened in some way we leave. With Peter, we are hurrying to confess our shortcomings. Or maybe we remember something remarkable and life-giving from our past, running to see if it might happen again, if new life is possible even for those of us caught in a web of conflicting feelings and actions.”¹ We know Peter. We are Peter.

And then there is Mary Magdalene. Mary comes to the tomb not really expecting anything to happen. She comes to weep. Someone she loves, someone she cared about, someone who gave her life meaning, who gave her hope, is gone. She has come to say good bye, to have a last moment with the body, to touch him, to have a moment to herself to mourn. She doesn't expect anything to happen. We know people like her too. We see them at a funeral, overcome by grief. We see them in church, here because it is what they are supposed to do, coming out of habit, coming because someone else brought them, not really knowing why they are coming. They certainly don't expect anything to happen. And when something does happen, they often don't recognize it. Mary sees two angels and doesn't realize that they are messengers from God. She sees Jesus himself and thinks he's the gardener. Because she doesn't expect anything else. She doesn't expect miracles. She doesn't think there is reason to hope.

1 Pittman, Nancy Claire, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 2, p. 377.*

She doesn't think there is meaning in anything new. She comes to the tomb to mourn what had been.

We know Mary. Sometimes we are Mary. We come to church for many reasons, but none of them are hope. We don't really expect anything to happen. We don't expect miracles.

But that's exactly what happens. Someone speaks her name. "Mary." If we hear our name, do we listen? Do we open our eyes and see who it is? Do we look around us and see the miracles? Not just the return of spring, the opening of the flowers, miracles to be sure, but do we see the miracle of each other—this disparate group of people who gather together in the early morning, hoping to hear some good news? Do we see the miracle of ourselves—whether we are John in his optimism, or Peter in his conflictedness, or Mary stuck in the past—the miracle that God reaches us where we are and gives us new life, new hope, new meaning. Because the tomb is empty? Well not just that. The empty tomb is not the good news. Jesus doesn't tell Mary to go back and tell everyone that the tomb is empty. As far as we know the earliest Christian writer is the apostle Paul. He wrote his letters 15-20 years before the first of the gospel was written. Know how many times the empty tomb is mentioned in Paul's letters? That's right, none. It is not the empty tomb that convinces those early disciples to go out and risk their lives telling the good news. There's lots of reasons the tomb could have been empty. It's not the empty tomb, it's the presence of the living Christ. Mary doesn't go back to the disciples and say to them, "The tomb is really empty!" She goes back and says, "I have seen the Lord." I have seen the Lord. Have you? In this day, in God's creation, in the tears of grief, in the faith of a friend, in the joy of life, in the strength of endurance, in the miracle of one another, in the wonder of your self—have you seen the Lord? He's here—he's risen—if we can only open our eyes.