

WHAT IS THE FIRST EMOTION YOU ASSOCIATE WITH EASTER?

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

April 23, 2000

"(Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, And Salome) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Mark 16:8

Early Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Sa-lo-me came to the tomb looking for Jesus. They expected to find him there but they didn't. They entered the tomb and were startled by "a strange and talkative young man dressed in white." "Do not be alarmed," he said. But they *were* alarmed. They hoped to find Jesus but he wasn't there. Unlike us, they'd never read the Easter gospel. They knew only that they saw Jesus die on Friday. They saw his body wrapped in linen and laid in this very tomb. They watched as the large stone was rolled into place. They knew where he was buried. They knew where he was. They knew where to find him. So they were alarmed when they *didn't* find him where they expected.

It's hard for us to experience their fear this Easter morning. We've heard the story so many times the empty tomb doesn't frighten us. We've come to the tomb *year after year* and found it empty. We've heard the young man in white proclaim *year after year* that Christ is risen. We've said *Christ is Risen* so often it's like saying Jesus went to bed, slept well, and woke up in the morning. Easter has become commonplace. But try to enter the lives of these women. Imagine we've come with them to look for Jesus. We know where to find him – at least we think we do. And suddenly we meet a young man all dressed up in a brand new white Easter suit where we expect to find the dead body of Jesus. So we're alarmed. Mark tells us the three women, "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Let's stay with their fear. Let the empty tomb frightened us. We're upset, scared because we can't find Jesus. Fear was the first emotion the early Christians associated with Easter. Fear! Not joy, but fear – because they couldn't find Jesus.

My guess is some of us are looking for Jesus and can't find him. I hope that does scares ^{us} you. Maybe ^{we} you are scared. Maybe ^{we're} you're disappointed. Intellectual difficulties keep some people from finding Jesus. ^{we} You may discover that members of this church are what we say we are – sinners – and that disappoints you because you expect to find perfect people in church and that false expectation keeps you from finding Jesus. Maybe ^{we} you once walked down an aisle in an evangelistic meeting hoping to find Jesus but didn't and now ^{we} you feel cheated.

Maybe ^{we} you use to go to church but, instead of finding Jesus, ^{we} you met people who condemned, threatened and scared you. On the other hand, maybe ^{we} you're not looking for Jesus. ^{we've} You've just been dragged here by a spouse or parent.

There's nothing I want more for all of us than to meet the Risen Christ. To meet him is life, health, peace, joy, salvation. But Jesus *often* isn't where we expect to find him. The women look for him in the tomb, with the dead but the risen Christ goes before them into Galilee. Galilee – where Jesus preached and healed the sick and raised the dead and ate and drank with sinners. Galilee – back home where the two Mary's and Sa-lo-me lived and grew up and where their families still lived. Easter morning moves us out of the graveyard to Galilee, the place Jesus has promised to meet us. We hesitate to follow him. The problem with most of us is that we want to *find* Jesus before we *follow* him. We want absolute proof for the resurrection *before we follow him*. We want all our fears and doubts removed *before we follow him*. We want to play it safe.

We stand today with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Sa-lo-me. They had no absolute proof for the resurrection. They had no proof they'd find Jesus but they followed him to Galilee anyway. They didn't wait for all their fears to be removed. They followed where the Risen Christ had gone. They ran back to Galilee terrified, and there Jesus met them, just as he said he would. Mark doesn't tell us they found Jesus but we know they did otherwise we wouldn't be here this morning. The important thing for us, though, is that the three women *followed Jesus before they found him*. Pastor and novelist Fred Buechner says, "We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is *only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is.*"

So, will you join us as we go with those three women to Galilee? Will you follow with us to where the Risen Christ has gone? Follow Jesus even before you find him. Follow Jesus! You may not find Jesus but he'll find you. In one of his books, John Powell, a Professor at Loyola University in Chicago, talks about a former student named Tommy:

I spotted Tommy on the first day of class. I immediately pegged him as being very strange. He had long blond hair that came down to his waist. I'd never seen a boy with hair that long. Tommy turned out to be the *atheist in residence*. He constantly objected to, smirked at, or whined about the possibility of an

unconditionally loving personal God. When he came up at the end of the course to turn in his final exam, he asked in a slightly cynical tone: "Do you think I'll ever find Christ?"

I found myself answering, "No, I don't! But I'm absolutely certain he'll find you!"

He shrugged, left my class and I didn't see him for several years. Then I heard Tommy had terminal cancer. He came to see me. When he walked in, he looked emaciated and his long hair had fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was strong.

"Tommy, I hear you're sick!"

"Yes! It's a matter of weeks."

"Can you talk about it?"

"Sure."

"What's it like to be only twenty-four and dying?"

"Could be worse."

"Like what?"

"Well, like being fifty and having no values, no ideals; like being fifty and thinking that booze and making money and moving up the ladder are all important. But what I really came to see you about is something you said to me on the last day of class. I asked you if you thought I'd ever find Christ and you said, *No! But he'll find you.* I thought about that a lot. When the doctors told me I had terminal cancer I got serious about finding Christ but I couldn't find him. Nothing happened. It scared me. Eventually I just quit looking. Didn't care about Christ. Didn't care about life after death. I just stopped looking for him. I decided to spend the time I had left doing something more profitable than searching for God. So I went back home where I grew up, where my family and old friends lived. I hadn't gotten along with my dad for years. He hated my long hair and my anti-establishment outlook. He'd written *me* off and *I'd* written him off. But I wanted to talk with him. He was reading the newspaper:

'Dad?'

'Yeah, what?' He didn't even lower the paper.

'Dad, I want to talk with you.'

'Well, talk!'

'Dad, it's real important.'

The newspaper slowly lowered and he looked at me. 'What is it?'

'Dad, I love you. I just want you to know.'

The newspaper fell to the floor. Then my dad did two things I could never remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. We talked all night even though he had to go to work the next morning. It felt so good to be close to my dad, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say *I love you*. Then I went, in turn, to my mom and my brother. I told them, *I love you*. They also cried and we hugged each other. And we started talking to each other, I mean *really* talking. We shared things we'd kept secret for years. I'm sorry I waited so long. Then one day I turned around and Christ was there. *He found me*. I'd stopped looking. But *he found me*."

And the young man in white told the three women, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised: he is not here. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you (back home) to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you."

Let's go with them. Will ~~they~~ you come with us, accompany us at OPC as we journey to Galilee... you'll ~~meet Christ~~ find Christ... if not, he'll find you.
I acknowledge the great help given to me by Barbara Lundblad in a sermon she preached in 1997.