

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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I Am With You

When the women arrived at the tomb, they were greeted by an earthquake and an angel - he rolled back the stone and sat on it, as if to make a point! *"I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified; he is not here, he is risen, just as he said."* But then - *"go tell the men he will meet them in Galilee."* As they flee, Jesus meets them, and says the same - *"go tell my brothers they will see me in Galilee."* And so he does, and there he tells them to go *"to all nations,"* where *"he will be with them always."*

The Easter promise: you will meet Jesus; he will always be with you. Really? One way to grasp that is to see how particular people met him, and how he changed them. Three named people meet Jesus in the Gospel narratives. They are Mary, Tom and Peter. They could hardly have been more different.

1) Mary

The Mary in question here is the one known as Magdalene, meaning she came from the town of Magdala, on the shore of Lake Galilee. We hear of her first in the mid-part of Jesus' Galilean ministry, as one of the women accompanying Jesus and his disciples, and supporting them out of their means. Mary's distinctive was that she was the one *"from whom Jesus had driven out seven demons."*

We can have no idea, and no details are given, of what that meant. Whatever it was, it was a terrible experience. There is a tradition that she had been a prostitute, but that due to confusion of several Marys in the

Gospels. Whatever her story, she was now a devoted follower of Jesus. She traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. She was at the cross, with Jesus' mother Mary and his aunt Mary, the men apart from John having fled. She was with Joseph when they took Jesus' body from the cross and laid it in the tomb. And she was there, early in the morning on the first day of the week to honor him.

And so she became the first one to bring back the news that the stone was rolled away and the tomb empty! The men ran to investigate, found it was so, and went away confused. But Mary stayed there, weeping; twice she was asked why she wept - and then Jesus spoke her name, and no doubt she wept even more!

Mary, from whom he had driven out seven demons; Mary who is crying almost every time we meet her; Mary of Magdala is the first witness of her risen Lord! We never hear of her again. But her memory is cherished by everyone who comes out of a life of total disaster, and finds in Jesus the healing and restoration she needs, and forever afterwards is deeply, emotionally committed to her Lord. Jesus doesn't let Mary simply cling to him, which she would gladly do, but sends her to bring good news to others. To Mary and all her descendants, Jesus gladly and personally appears, and greets them softly by name.

2) Thomas

Thomas is, of course, as different as you can get from Mary. He is one of the Twelve, in

the middle rank with Matthew and Philip and Bartholomew; and by all accounts a straightforward, brave if sometimes argumentative man. When Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem, to the dismay of his closest friends, Thomas declares *"let us go... and die with him."* In the Upper Room, when Jesus speaks of leaving to prepare a place for them, it is Thomas who tries to cut through the mists of incomprehension and demands of Jesus: *"we don't know where you're going; how can we know the way?"* and thereby elicits one of Jesus' most memorable sayings, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."*

And so we already know something of Thomas the skeptic - "doubting Thomas" as some have called him. After the Resurrection, he was not with the other ten when Jesus first appeared to them, and he was unconvinced by their story. *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe."* Thomas the pragmatist; the one who wants empirical evidence. He has a clear mind and a strong spirit and he wants the truth.

And so Jesus meets him with exactly the answers he wants. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out and put your hand in my side." Thomas believes when he sees the evidence, and he falls at Jesus' feet to utter one of the two most profound human confessions in the Gospels - to go with Peter's *"you are the Christ"* is Thomas's *"My Lord and my God;"* the crowning moment of the 4th Gospel.

Jesus meets the skeptics, the sons of Thomas, wherever they are, and gives them what they need in order to believe. Thomas is not Mary, and his needs are different, but Jesus is equally prepared to meet them. But he always does so with a challenge. Mary must not cling, Thomas must give up his stubborn insistence on having everything on his terms - for there is more than doubt behind his statement *"unless I see... I will not believe."* Jesus says *"stop doubting, and believe,"* and there are times when those of us who pride ourselves on our minds and our ability to sift

the data for nuggets of truth, simply have to capitulate to God. One definition of faith is "resting the mind in the sufficiency of the evidence," and sometimes we need to do just that - rest our minds and stop arguing with God.

3) Peter

Finally, of course, there is Peter. He met the risen Lord with the others in that locked room in Jerusalem. He saw the encounter between Jesus and Thomas. But now Peter goes back to Galilee, and goes fishing. Back to what he knows; back to what is safe. Jesus has said he will see them there, but Peter is not waiting around; he has gone fishing; not catching a thing, but gone fishing! He has much on his mind. The memories of Jerusalem still hurt. He had been the leader, spokesman for the Twelve; he said he would defend Jesus to the death, had drawn his sword to prove it, but then cracked.

He had crept in with John to watch Jesus' trial from a safe distance, and been outed by a slave girl and a bystander who heard a Galilean accent. And Peter had sworn, in that moment of fear, that he never knew this Jesus. And the cock had crowed, and he had remembered Jesus' predicting his denials, and he had gone out and wept bitterly. Jesus had said nothing about it when he appeared in the locked room - only Thomas had received attention. Was Peter now permanently out of favor; discarded from leadership; someone to be remembered only as a failure?

Brooding by the lake, Peter is finally called by Jesus. "Come and eat breakfast." He must have trembled when he sat down to eat! But Jesus meets him just where he is. Does he still love Jesus? Of course he does. Then that is all. Three times he is challenged to take up his calling - to lead, and feed, and shepherd Jesus' little flock of followers. Three times Peter is restored, and not one of his three denials is mentioned - ever.

Peter's spiritual descendants are glad of that. Too many of us fail too badly, and knowing

that we can be not only forgiven but restored to God's service is a sign of grace we need to live by. To know that loving Jesus is sufficient for shepherding his people, and that we don't have to be perfect, is to live with relief and peace and gratitude.

4) *Who is Welcome?*

Surely Mary, Thomas and Peter teach us that nobody is beyond reach. No matter our past, or our doubts, or our disbelief, or our failure, Jesus meets us and welcomes us. He reaches out to all kinds of people, and he meets each one of us and deals with us where we are. If you are an emotional person, he will meet you there. If you are a skeptic and a rationalist, he will meet you. If you are a gifted, erratic, failure-prone personality, he can use you too.

Don't ever feel that you are not welcome, or that faith is for other people - the successful people, the moral and respectable people, the people with strong beliefs, or with weak minds. Nobody is excluded, no matter where they have come from, or what they have done, or what has been done to them.

Jesus says "*I will meet you... I will be with you always.*" He said it then, and he still says it now. He is risen, and he is still alive, and he still meets us today - sometimes in mysterious and unexpected ways, sometimes in very ordinary and predictable ones. Let him know you would like to meet him, or to know him better, and he will come.

May the risen Lord of Easter, and every Spring, and every Sunday, meet you today!

Let us pray...