



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Will You Believe It?”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

John 20: 1-18

April 1, 2018 – Easter Sunday

When our kids were little we were given this wonderful book that told the major stories of the Bible in a fashion that was accessible to the mind of a young child. We would read it with them now and then, the kids would read it themselves as they laid down in bed at night, and it was a great early-entry into some of the stories of our faith. There was one scene, one particular illustration, however, with which we struggled – and that was the scene of the crucifixion. You see, this particular scene was a little more graphic than we might have anticipated in a child’s book – some of the gory details a little more prevalent in the imagery – and the first time we shared the story together as a family, the eyes of our oldest (who was probably only 4 or 5 at the time) went straight to those details.

“Why is Jesus bleeding?” She asked! “What is that in his hands?” “What are they doing to him?” You could see the angst building up inside of her – as was mine as I was trying to figure out how to answer those questions in the manner in which a pre-schooler would understand – but then, as quickly as her questions had erupted, so did her self-calming response, “But, that’s ok. It’s all just pretend!” That was our one-liner for the monsters in the storybooks or the scene of the movie that startled them – ‘It’s all just pretend.’ And, as quickly as she had begun to confront the realities of the crucifixion, she moved on with discounting them as fairytale fabrication – just like every other book or movie she’d encountered.

Now, in that moment, I was perfectly fine with that. We didn’t need to try to get a four-year-old to take on truths with which we wrestle as adults. But, that comment is something that has always kind of stuck with me and, this year in particular, as Easter falls on April Fool’s Day – I find myself taken by our pre-disposition, at least at times, to treat Easter with a very similar attitude of dismissal.

We live in a culture, in a society, in which we are increasingly skeptical of anything we read, hear, and even witness in our lives.

- We can’t believe what we hear on the news because it seems that just about anyone broadcasting it is subjectively biased by some agenda or another.

- We can't believe what we read on the internet because the line between truth and fiction is more and more blurred every day – and the capacity to discern the difference is increasingly problematic.
- And, we can't even believe what we see because in this generation of photoshop, computer generated imagery, and visual manipulation, people can create glaring and inarguable proof of something that we come to find, soon thereafter, was actually completely fabricated.

We live in a culture, in a society, in which we are ever more dubious of most any claim in our lives because we simply don't know if we can trust the message, the medium or the source of whatever it is we are hearing, reading, seeing or noting at any given time. And that's a problem –that's a problem in a lot of ways for us in our lives. But, particularly, on this day, in this moment, it's a problem because I think it sometimes might cause us to become a lot like Mary that morning, and it might cause us to overlook the promise...the glory...the wonder...the miracle that stands right before us on Easter morning!

That, to me, is the utterly profound element of that moment of Mary right outside the empty tomb. We hear the story of Mary discovering the empty tomb and our mind jumps right to the miracle – right to the resurrection – but Mary's doesn't. No, Mary goes to anoint the body of Jesus in that tomb and, when she finds it empty, she runs to Jesus' closest friends to tell them that Jesus is missing. Not that Jesus is alive, not that the resurrection has occurred, not that God's love-inspired plan for humanity has come to fruition, but that the body of their teacher and friend has been stolen. That's where Mary is in that moment – she has no sense of what has happened, she hopelessly runs off to the others because she thinks that someone stole the body of their dead friend.

As soon as they hear the news, Peter and the other disciple go running towards the tomb and do, themselves, come to a revelation of what has actually happened. And, we don't get a sense of what the next interaction is between those men and Mary – but as they elatedly run back to their homes to begin sharing the incredible news of what has occurred, Mary just stands there, weeping, outside the tomb. And, it's what comes next that is so remarkably fascinating to me!

The Disciples have seen, understood and believed in the glory of the resurrection – they've run off to tell their friends about what has happened – but Mary is despondent, forlorn, seemingly motionless as she stands at the edge of the tomb overwhelmed by the grief that has only been exacerbated by the fact that she now can't even anoint the body of her friend as she longed to do, and he most certainly deserved. All Mary wants, in this moment, is to give Jesus a proper burial – and now she can't even do that! But, then – and this is the image that I pray each and every one of us will carry out today – then Mary was suddenly face to face with the risen Christ. And still, she didn't see, she didn't understand...she still didn't grasp what it was that was happening.

I want you to just picture that scene. In that place, on that morning, in that moment, Mary was standing face to face with the risen Lord, and she didn't see it, should wouldn't see it, she couldn't get herself to that point of seeing...knowing...believing what had come to pass. This somewhat humorous exchange takes place in which Mary believes Jesus is the gardener and starts asking Jesus where he has put Jesus, and then finally Jesus calls out her name, her eyes are

opened to what has taken place, and her unbearable grief shifts to unspeakable praise and exuberance as she realizes that her grief, her sorrow, her pain, her worry, her fear – her every angst and strife has just been erased in the face of the risen Lord who was standing right there all along!

It's really, when you consider it, an amazing scene – a remarkable image. But, what I want to suggest is that right here, right now, that's where we are! Right here, right now, on this Easter morning, in the midst of our culturally-inspired proclivity for disbelief and dubiousness – we are standing face to face with the risen Christ, and the question that was Mary's is now ours! What has always struck me about that exchange with our daughter when we read that book is that her dismissal of the profound truth behind this story, in that moment, was ok. But, I do wonder how often we tend to allow that same sentiment to seep into our lives of faith today. It may not be that we outwardly proclaim that it's all pretend, but I do wonder how often, in light of our societal cynicism, how often we truly allow ourselves to experience that incomparable bliss of embracing the truth of what this story means for us.

Mary stood there – face to face with the risen Christ – and, if even for just a moment, her earthly lenses simply could not allow her to see through to the magnificence, the wonder, the promise, the hope, the love that was standing right in front of her eyes. That's us, in this moment, in this place, today – that's us!

- Christ was born to give us a glimpse of the love and glory of God.
- Christ lived to show us what that love could mean for our lives.
- Christ died to open, for us, the doors to everlasting glory.
- And, Christ rose to allow that glory, that power, that presence, and that love to not only be a promise for tomorrow, but to be a part of every moment of today – right here...right now!

Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Christ is standing before us in this place, in this moment, in this very day of our lives – calling our names and longing for us to break through our cynicism, that we might see as Mary saw, that we might believe as Mary believed, and that we might know the joy, the wonder, the magnificence, the true miracle of the Risen Lord standing before our eyes and entering into every moment of our lives!

We live in a culture, in a society, in which we are ever more dubious of most any claim in our lives because we simply don't know if we can trust the message, the medium or the source of whatever it is we are hearing, reading, seeing or noting at any given time. But, Christ is risen! And, Christ is risen that we might not only know that God's love awaits us in eternity, but that we might know that love in and through his presence today – that we might truly know that every grief, sorrow, pain, worry, fear, struggle and strife that we confront in life is nothing in the face of the glory and power of the risen Christ who stands right before us. We are Mary – standing face to face with the risen Christ – and the profound joy and wonder that was hers is ours for the taking – right here and right now. Really, the only question is whether we will open ourselves to that incomparable bliss that comes from knowing, in our heart, that Christ is risen indeed!

Will you join me in prayer...

