



## ***“Where We Are”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*April 5, 2026 – Easter Sunday*

With two daughters in college, and our youngest son nearing the end of his junior year in high school, we are increasingly finding ourselves, for the third time in the past four years, engaged in that journey of exploring college options and opportunities for the next chapter of life. With that, of course, comes all of those questions about what courses are being taken, what grades are obtained, what test scores are reached, what leadership positions are held, what points of community service are listed, and on and on. In that ever-moving target of both admission and scholarships for college, there is this persistent undertone of discerning where, when and how we ‘measure up’ to the standards that might be at hand in any particular circumstance.

There’s an entire industry of consultants focused on college planning and admissions that is built around this looming desire to try to make sure that students check the right boxes, for the right places, at the right times. And, it doesn’t stop with college. From careers, to relationships, to meeting the future in-laws, to clubs and organizations of which we are (or long to be) a part, our life is constantly embroiled in that pervasive, and frankly insidious, question of whether or not we somehow or other meet that standard of being where ‘they’ (whoever ‘they’ may be) expect us to be in order to be welcomed into whatever circle it is we are trying to enter. Do we look right? Do we think right? Do we speak right? Do we have the right background, or training, or experience, or attitude, or... or... or... It is nothing new. It is nothing of a surprise to anyone who has lived long at all in this culture that surrounds us. It is also, however, a fundamental worldview that I am convinced clouds the very heart and promise of all that led up to (and follows) that moment that we remember and celebrate today!

Those who have been here for pieces or all of the last six weeks of the Lenten season know that we have spent that time exploring a series of encounters with Jesus. It has been a handful of samples, mostly from the Gospel According to John, in which individuals come face to face, in some way or another with Jesus.

- We started with Nicodemus, that Pharisee who was part of the group that so vehemently opposed Jesus, who came to Jesus secretly in the darkness of night seeking to learn more from, and better understand, this prophet who was doing such inexplicable things.
- We continued with that Samaritan Woman at the well – a woman who had every reason to believe that Jesus couldn’t/shouldn’t/wouldn’t take time for her, who found in Jesus an invitation and welcome that she never would have anticipated.

- We looked at that blind man on the side of the road who was suddenly pulled into the heart of Jesus' story, and we looked at the progression of his understanding and faith as his healing brought questions and challenges from so many others around him.
- We looked at Mary and Martha, overwhelmed by grief and sorrow upon the death of their brother, whose faith and trust brought them to Jesus in the wake of their loss, and whose grief was met with a wonder and glory previously unimaginable.
- While we didn't focus on it on a Sunday, our Wednesday discussion group looked at Peter and his threefold denial of Jesus on the night of his arrest that was later followed by a threefold affirmation of Jesus in those days that followed the resurrection.
- Then, just a few moments ago, we were reminded of that image of Mary Magdalene standing face to face in front of Jesus – staring him in the eyes with no idea that he is who he is – until that moment when Jesus calls out her name.

It has been, for me at least, an intriguing Lenten journey of exploring these encounters, and we are going to come back to them in a few minutes. Before we do that, however, I have one more that I want to share. The 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel opens with his telling of the resurrection story. The women discover the empty tomb, they rush back to the other disciples (who are notably dubious about the tale these women tell), Peter rushes on to see the empty tomb for himself, and goes home amazed by what has happened. And then, the narrative shifts to a couple of those disciples heading towards a neighboring town called Emmaus. Luke tells the story this way...

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"*

Now, it's worth a pause here to note the narrative parallel between John's depiction of Mary outside the tomb and that which unfolds here in Luke on the road to Emmaus. In the midst of all of the awe and wonder of the unfolding events, I think there's a moment of humor to consider that John tells us that Mary stood in the garden and asked Jesus what Jesus had done with body of Jesus. Then, Luke puts us a bit later in the day and has these two disciples walking with Jesus and telling Jesus everything that had happened to Jesus all while, just like Mary, they had no clue that it was Jesus. We'll come back to that. First, back to the story...

*19 [Jesus] asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women*

*had said, but they did not see him.” 25 Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

Now, the story goes on from here in which they reach town, invite Jesus into their home for a meal (still with no idea that he is who he is) and then finally upon sharing that meal their eyes are opened and they realize who it’s been all along. It’s a tale that is filled with irony, intrigue, and a decent amount of humor. It is also, however, another in this sequence of encounters with Jesus, both before and after his resurrection, in which the heart of the encounter is Jesus meeting people where they were!

Stick with me on this...

- When Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness of night because he feared what might happen should his visit be discovered, Jesus didn’t chastise him for that fear or decry his lack of willingness to stand against his cohorts. No, Jesus welcomed the conversation and found ways to try to speak to the new path that Nicodemus might follow.
- When Jesus encountered that Samaritan woman at the well, he didn’t cast her aside because of her cultural roots or life’s circumstances. He asked for a drink and offered her that living water that could forever nurture her soul.
- When Jesus met the suffering of that blind man on the street, he didn’t ask what that man had done for Jesus lately... he didn’t ask for a profession of faith... he didn’t ask anything of that man... he simply reached into his life and gave him sight – both literal and figurative.
- When Jesus arrived in Bethany to the grief of Mary and Martha, some four days after the burial of their brother, he didn’t question their grief or castigate their sorrow. He entered into their pain, cried along with them, and brought new life out of death as he raised Lazarus from the grave.
- When Peter denied Jesus three times on that fateful night – just as Jesus said would happen and Peter swore would not – Jesus didn’t cast him aside, condemn him or cut him off. No, in wake of his resurrection, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to affirm his faith just as many times as he had denied it just days before.
- And when Jesus stood with Mary Magdalene in that garden and walked with those disciples on the road to Emmaus – people who had known Jesus well, who were part of his inner circle – he didn’t reprimand their failure to recognize him. He simply met them in that space and allowed their hearts, in their time, to become attuned to his voice that their eyes might be opened.

We could go on about Jesus allowing Thomas to touch his wounds, or healing the hemorrhaging woman who just grazed his cloak, or calling Zacchaeus out of the tree, or any of a hundred different moments from both before and after the glory of the resurrection. What we see throughout these encounters, however, from one story to the next, is Jesus meeting people where they were!

- When they came in fear – Jesus met them there.
- When they came with questions and confusion – Jesus met them there.

- When they fell short of the call – Jesus met them there.
- When they came in suffering, or grief, or doubt, or ignorance, or any of the thousand other human emotions and experiences that overtake us from day to day, Jesus met them there.

And, do you note what is missing from all of these stories? Do you see what's not there? Not once did Jesus ask these individuals to state their beliefs, or prove their worthiness, or display their righteousness, or in any way bring evidence that they 'measured up' to some perceived standard that would grant them the 'right' to be welcomed in. Not once!

Now, to be sure, many of these stories proceed from that moment of Jesus meeting them where they are into another in which Jesus is seeking to help usher them from where they are to a new place in their life and faith, but never do they need to be there to begin with. From one encounter to the next, no matter what human frailty consumed the person involved, Jesus met them there! Period!

We live in a world that is constantly embroiled in that pervasive, and frankly insidious, question of whether or not we somehow or other meet that standard of being where 'they' expect us to be in order to be welcomed into whatever circle it is we are trying to enter. Do we look right? Do we think right? Do we speak right? Do we have the right background, or training, or experience, or attitude, or... or... or... It is nothing new. It is nothing of a surprise to anyone who has lived long at all in this culture that surrounds us. It is also, however, the sheer antithesis of the divine love that preceded, that led to, and that continues on because of, the resurrection that we remember and celebrate today.

Jesus took on human form, that he might meet us where we are and give us that glimpse of God's love. Jesus lived among us and cast aside one social norm after the next that we might see the breadth of that love. Jesus climbed upon the cross that we might see the depth of that love. Jesus emerged from the tomb that we might know the power of that love. And now, to this very day, he lives on that we might continue to be, from each day to the next, met by that love where we are!

- In our fear – he is there!
- In our questions and confusion – he is there!
- When we fall short of the call – he is there!
- In our suffering, and our grief, and our doubt, and our ignorance, and in every one of those thousand other human emotions and experiences that overtake us from day to day, he is there!

In a world in which we are constantly confronted with the question of whether or not we are what we need to be in order to be welcomed in, the resurrection promise is our foundational reminder that we are forever enfolded in a love that meets us where we are. He is risen – and wherever we find ourselves today, tomorrow, and in the years to come – the good, the bad, the ugly, and all the in-between – he is risen to meet us there!