

Get the Good News

John 20:1-18

My guess is that most folks in this congregation consider themselves to be reasonably well versed in the news of the day. Many read the newspaper, either the local paper, a regional paper, or a national publication. Many still consume news from television, either network or cable. Sadly, much of what makes it on TV isn't so much news as gossip, what's trending, what gets people's attention. In-depth, intelligent coverage is pretty hard to come by. Newspapers do a lousy job on that front as well since they, too, are peddling their wares to consumers of tidbits, not readers of newspapers as it was in former times. Many may still read news magazines which can have features with depth, but those are also crammed with gossipy snippets for the breezy viewer. A rare exception is public TV and radio which still produce higher quality news. Being viewer funded in large measure, they focus on quality for the discerning listener/contributor rather than the attention-grabbing that will catch the eye of the passerby.

But even when we get the new, the frequent complaint is that it's all bad news. The old line in newspapers and in TV is, "If it bleeds, it leads." For TV, the camera demands to be fed something entertaining, flashing blue and red lights, noisy sirens, smoke and flames, distraught family members, shame-faced in handcuffs, crumpled car destroyed in a wreck, or a burned up home, or the like. Newspapers also seek that attention grabbing image for the front page. It's what sells, but the news isn't good. That's why it's difficult to actually define what they present as "news," as if it was something that would make you better, deeper, more meaningful, more informed for knowing about it. I haven't read a newspaper and felt that way in a very long time.

We get the news, usually bad news, that doesn't typically do much for our lives one way or another. As news consumers, the news we get is kind of like a bag of pretzels; not expensive, readily available, insubstantial, makes you think you've made a better choice, better than potato chips, Doritos, or a Twinkie, but quite frankly it's still junk food of negligible nutritional value, and it hasn't done much good for you.

So what would it look like if we got only "good" news when we tuned in at 10pm to the local network. Would it be clips of puppies and babies, or family reunions and birthday celebrations, weddings and baptisms, lost wallets returned intact, people stopping traffic so that a family of ducks can cross the road?

And the weather. Always the weather. You notice how they manage to give you a weather report, starting with a teaser and then telling more and more about the forecast as they repeat the weather no less than five times in one hour, usually more. And the big news about the weather? It's Florida. It's only a question of how sunny and how hot it's going to be. It isn't exactly "news," but given the time expended, weather is about the most important thing in an hour-long broadcast.

Seriously, all “good” news would get pretty tedious, too. Our lives aren’t shaped by flashing lights, burning wrecks, and hysterical people which is why the local news doesn’t do much for us, except perhaps make people a bit more fearful, and enable them to practice their cluck – “tsk, tsk.” All “good” is equally distant from our experience of life and wouldn’t shape us any differently either, except perhaps making people feel momentarily better about the mess we live in, and enable us to practice our “awwwes.” It’s like a pack of Twinkies.

Something truly newsworthy is something that brings us a new perspective, a fresh insight, an empowering truth, helpful information, a renewed positive practice, and the like.

The scripture reading is about the discovery of particular news, the one and only Good News. You know the story. At the start of the third day, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene has gone to the tomb. Unlike in other gospel accounts, here in John, Mary is alone and we also don’t know why she has gone to the tomb.

Once she gets there, she sees that stone has been rolled away from the entrance. She doesn’t look inside the tomb, but turns and runs back to tell the disciples. Yet her report to the disciples states: *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.* First, she never looked inside the tomb, we thought. Second, who is “we” as in *we do not know where they laid him.* It’s an indication that this story assumes facts that have become part of the tradition, that there were three women – “we” – and they looked inside the tomb and saw it was empty.

Upon hearing Mary’s report, Peter and the one known as the “beloved disciple” have a bit of a footrace in getting to the tomb. Notice how Mary and any other woman have been dropped from the narrative at this point. All attention is on the male disciples and their race to the tomb.

The “beloved disciple” arrived first, looking in but not entering the tomb. Peter blows right into the tomb and saw the burial clothes in which Jesus had been wrapped. Then the beloved disciple joined Peter inside, and it says, *He saw and believed.* About Peter’s level of recognition, the text says nothing. But even with the “beloved disciple,” what does it mean that *he saw and believed.* To make it even more of a head-scratcher, the parenthetical editorial remark, *for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.* So, what exactly does the beloved disciple *see and believe?* Whatever it is, it must be pretty vague. Jesus has overturned death, it would seem, and that would be a likely conclusion for the “beloved disciple” and his understanding.

Then we hear that both disciples went back home, End of story for them, for now. They have news alright, but they really don’t understand what it means, and therefore don’t really understand what to do with it.

With the boys having gone home for the day, John’s story continues, resuming the narrative with Mary. This kind of extension of one story into several stories is a common practice in the gospel of John. Here, the reader may think the story is finished,

but in fact, Mary is still there at the tomb. How she got there, we don't know. It is reasonable to imagine that she ran right behind the disciples. She has no answer that works for her, and is pretty desperate to get some news that makes sense.

She enters the tomb, and there are angels seated where Jesus' body had been, asking her, *Woman, why are you crying?* She replies, *They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.* At this point, she is expecting that there has been some theft of the corpse – unlikely with the clothes having been unwrapped from the body, or else some movement of the corpse to another location – again, unlikely with the clothes having been unwrapped from the body.

Then from the other side of the tomb, outside it by her, there was someone else there. She turned to see a man standing there. Surely he would know. He asks her the questions again, *Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?* She replies, somewhat imagining her suspicions will be confirmed, *Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will get him.*

At this point, Jesus reveals himself to her. It would seem that she has reached for him, but Jesus quickly says, *Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."*

In this interestingly arranged characterization, we have Mary at the tomb, Mary telling the disciples, and then a whole scene dominated by the two men who race to the tomb, get there, and seem to leave with scant knowledge or even curiosity about what may have happened. Then the story returns to Mary who gets the good news.

The good news is that the death meted out by the powers of the era was not the final word. They thought they had done everything that would end the ministry of love, justice and peace that Jesus brought to the gates of power earlier in the week. They thought that he had been silenced, their own power made secure.

I explained to the Sunday School class a few weeks ago how different the earliest Christians were. They were known as the people of peace, compassion, and fellowship. They stood in total contrast to the peace of Rome, the so called *Pax Romana*, which was a peace brought about by fear and brutal oppression at the hands of Roman soldiers. They stood against the caesars who declared themselves the sons of god, having Jesus of Nazareth, the risen One, who is the son of God. All of that changed in the early 4th century when Emperor Constantine effectively began the merger of Christianity with the empire, forever changing the role of the church.

The good news is that God has affirmed God's sovereignty over life and death. Death cannot threaten the faithful servant of the Kingdom any longer. The faithful will emerge triumphant. The faithful must stand against the pretender powers of every age who use violence, who oppress, and who exploit. The demands of obedience to corrupt and useless values of greed, power, and violence have been overturned. Jesus

announced to Mary that he was soon going home, returning to his Father in heaven, living the promise of new life.

Have we gotten the good news? It isn't about getting your ticket to the afterlife. It's about getting your ticket to the authentic life, the faithful life, the spiritually anchored life, here and now. The faithful servant of the Kingdom can give their life to the work of faithful ministry, giving it all, even unto death itself, and the faithful will triumph. Easter morning is meant to empower us to do the work of ministry that changes lives, changes society, changes the order that the world imposes on us. Easter morning brings the light of hope, the word of the new life promise fulfilled. Let us give thanks and rejoice in the victory that empowers faithful servants to act in witness to the goodness of Jesus Christ, in witness to the good news that we have received today.