

“An Easter Start”
John 20:1-10

In his book *Sources of Strength*, former President Jimmy Carter recalls a moment from his first day in office. "I had just been inaugurated," he wrote, "walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, reviewed the parade with my family, and then begun to walk with my family, for the first time, toward the White House. Eager news reporters with cameras surrounded us, and my press secretary said, 'Don't anyone stop to answer questions.' In typical fashion," Carter went on, "Mama ignored him and stopped to talk to the press. The first question was 'Miss Lillian, aren't you proud of your son?' and Mama replied 'Which one?'" (*Leadership*, Summer 98, p. 77)

I love her response. She clearly knew who the reporter had in mind, but was not going on the record as picking a favorite. One son ran a gas station and the other was now Commander-in-Chief, yet she was proud of both, seeking to lessen any competitive spirit between them.

Anyone who has been a manager or teacher, coach or parent of more than one child knows how challenging that can be, either not to have a favorite, or if you do, not to act differently toward the other. The flip side of that dynamic is that even when you don't play favorites others are watching for some clue that you are not treating everyone the same. It is not a new challenge, of course, and the first disciples were not exempt from it either, as the Biblical text we just read reveals that dynamic was clearly at play on the first Easter, too.

In the account we read, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb and finds the massive stone that had covered its entrance is now to the side. "She ran and went to Simon Peter," our text says "and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'" The men rush toward the burial site. "The two were running together," we heard "but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in." Peter arrives and does go inside. He see not only the cloth that had enclosed the body is there, but also the wrapping that had been around Jesus' head rolled up to the side. The other disciple then joins him and soon the two of them return to their homes.

Each of the four gospels have their own version of what occurred on that first Easter and were we to read ahead in this account would hear of how Mary Magdalene stays behind at the tomb and becomes the first person to witness the risen Christ. Yet we stop at this point of the narrative with its unfinished account, but clear depiction of a rivalry between two disciples.

To see that tension clearly, it's important for you to know of some other moments in this gospel when that unnamed disciple plays a prominent role. Prior to this scene, he is the one seated next to Jesus at the Last Supper who asks which of the Twelve is the betrayer. He is the one with connections to the high priest who secures entrance for Peter into the courtyard as Jesus' trial unfolds. He is the one who stands at the foot of the cross and to whom Jesus entrusts the care of his mother. After our scene, he is the one who first identifies the risen Christ on the shoreline; the disciple about whom Peter asks "What about this one?" Given those moments and the fact that this descriptor of "the one whom Jesus loved" is not found in Matthew, Mark or Luke, many scholars believe the disciple in question is none other than the author of this gospel.

Acting on that conclusion, let me retell portions of those first-century events using first-person language. "So Mary ran to Simon Peter and me and said 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb!' Then Peter and I set out and went toward the tomb. We were running together, but I was faster and reached the tomb first. I bent down to look and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but did not go in out of respect for my colleague. Then Simon Peter arrived and went

inside for a look. Only then did I, the one who reached the tomb first, go in.” Winston Churchill is often credited with saying “History is written by the Victors.” A parallel version might be that “This Gospel is written by Jesus’ favorite!”

Lest you think I’m being too hard on John I will tell you that among the four gospels, his is my favorite for all of the poetry and key moments found only in his pages. Yet he should also be praised for one key way he seemed to piece things together on that first Easter.

It comes when both Peter and the other disciple look inside in the tomb. Had the scene before them been one left behind by grave robbers surely they would not have stopped to unwrap the body. John says “Then the other disciple...also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” It’s a confusing sentence describing both belief and lack of understanding. Some have concluded that all the two men believed was that the tomb was empty, but one New Testament professor hears something more.

“It is important to remember,” Gail O’Day writes, “that [this passage is] an empty-tomb story, not a story of a resurrection appearance. What the beloved disciple believes then, is the evidence of the empty tomb: not merely that the tomb is empty, but that it’s emptiness bears witness that Jesus has conquered death and judged the ruler of this world...The beloved disciple’s faith is as complete as faith in the evidence of the empty tomb can be. To say that the beloved disciple believes in the resurrection is to rush the story...as the disciples have not yet experienced Jesus’ resurrection.” (O’Day, Gail “The Gospel of John,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 841) In other words, that competitive, disciple who wants the world to know he was Jesus’ favorite, is also the first one to understand Jesus has defeated death. It did not completely transform him. After all, his gospel was written decades after the events, but he still used the boastful language about himself. It did not even allow him to know on that Sunday morning that Jesus was alive, but it was a start.

This Easter holds the same potential as we have gathered with all of our strengths and shortcomings, too. As perhaps you have not arrived here out of breath as did two disciples long ago, but as one exhausted even so by all that has been happening in your life. Perhaps you have come here not as a fervent believer, but as a skeptic who is present only because it is a required first stop before lunch. Perhaps you have arrived not with a sense of expectation that something new will be discovered, but only to hear again the beautiful music celebrating those ancient events. Or it’s possible that you have arrived here with something in common with the author of our text, still wanting to get a leg up on someone else or impress the in-laws. We have gathered for all kinds of reasons, but like that first Easter what happens next can still transform.

The true story is told of a fourth grade class where the teacher introduced a game called “balloon stomp.” A balloon was tied to every child’s leg. When the signal was given, the object of the game was for the students to try to pop every other balloon while protecting their own. The last child with an intact balloon would be the winner. Once the rules were spelled out, the contest began. The children entered into the spirit of the thing vigorously. Balloons were relentlessly targeted and destroyed. Some children pretended to be enjoying the game but were secretly afraid of losing. A few of the children hung shyly on the sidelines, but that didn’t help them as their balloons were doomed just the same. The battle was over in a matter of seconds. Only one balloon was still inflated, and its owner was the most disliked child in class.

Things then changed. “A second class was brought in the room to play the same game, only this time it was a class of developmentally-challenged children. They were each given a balloon and the same instructions and the same signal started it. “I got a sinking feeling in my midsection,” said one onlooker. “I wanted to spare the kids the pressure of a competitive brawl.”

“Only this time the game proceeded differently. The instructions were given too quickly to be grasped very well by these children; out of the confusion the one idea that sunk in was that the balloons were supposed to be popped. But instead of fighting each other off, these children got the idea they that were supposed to help one another pop balloons. So they formed a kind of ‘balloon stomp co-op.’ One boy was getting frustrated because the balloon he was going after wouldn’t hold still enough for him to pop it. So the little girl to whom it was tied knelt down and held her balloon carefully in place, like the holder for a field-goal kicker, while the little boy stomped it flat. Big smile. Then he knelt down and held his balloon still for her to stomp. On and on it went, all the children helping one another in the Great Stomp. And when the very last balloon was popped, everybody cheered. Everybody won.” (Ortberg, John. *When The Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, pp. 35-36.)

The same can be said of that first Easter and this one, for like those first disciples we have come here with all of our expectations about life still in place. And even if some of them are not the best way to celebrate an empty tomb, it’s a start. What happens next is up to God.