

# “The Story We Find Ourselves In”

**Easter Sunday**

**April 4, 2010**

## **John 20:1-18**

The last few verses of John’s gospel tell us that this book came from the testimony of John himself, one of the 12 disciples. John was Jesus’ closest friend, part of what’s sometimes called The “Inner Circle” of Peter, James and John. They apparently had extra time with Jesus. In this passage John is referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” A friend of mine has a bumper sticker that reads: “*Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.*” Jesus loves everyone equally, but while on earth he appeared to have his closest friendship with John.

Let’s take a look:

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter 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.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, 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. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “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.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

I'd like to speak just briefly this morning on the subject - "The Story We Find Ourselves In." By the way, when I say, I'd like to "speak briefly this morning," that's no guarantee that I will! That's an intention, not a promise!

*"The Story We Find Ourselves In."* By being here this morning you have entered into a great, great story. I believe it's the greatest story that the world has ever known. There are other stories, of course. But this is our story, this is our song. It is larger than all of us combined. It is larger than all the Christians in the world put together. It's a grand and marvelous story. It goes all the way back to the First Century to such places as Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem. The Author of the story wrote the most decisive chapters in those places. Of course the story goes back even farther than that. The earliest parts of the story that we have, go back to about 2000 BC to a couple named Abraham and Sarah. Father Abraham and Mother Sarah got the story going when God called them to journey to a new land flowing with milk and honey, and they said "Yes" and started walking, and the story began. The Author of the Story wrote decisive chapters then too - an Exodus from Egypt, commandments from Mt. Sinai, and a journey through the wilderness to the Land of Promise.

It's quite a story, with amazing plot lines and intriguing, complicated characters. It's filled with mystery, passion, surprises, human goodness and human goodness, a divine call and divine grace.

The phrase, "The Story We Find Ourselves In" comes from Brian McLaren's book by that same title. This book is part of a trilogy written by McLaren. The first one is entitled, A New Kind of Christian. They are works of fiction that teach a new way of being a Christian - a new way of reading the Bible that honors and respects it greatly but takes into account the world in which we live. McLaren tackles such topics as science and evolution, other religions, heaven and hell, and the vocabulary of our faith.

Listen to what one of his characters, Kerry, says in, The Story We Find Ourselves In: *"I believe we are connected to the Creator by a story, a true story that begins with the words, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,' a story that ends with, 'Behold I make all things new.' There are other stories, too. Our story has room for all the other stories. It doesn't exclude them, or mock them or despise them. I believe it's the story in which all other stories can find themselves too."*

Another character, Neo, puts it this way: *"This story is the best one around, sistah. It has the truest news, the deepest views, the highest theme, the most inspiring dream, the plot most full of meaning and magic, vigor and rigor, startle and sparkle, emotion and motion. It rocks! If you give it a fair hearing, I think you'll agree."*

Now by calling all of this a story doesn't mean that it's not true. It is a true story that we find ourselves in - rooted and grounded in history and most importantly in God's interactions with real human beings. It's a true and an ongoing story - a story that we're trying to live out and be faithful to today.

Do you know that you and I are living out a number of stories simultaneously? (this explains why we're often so tired!) We're living out the story of human beings on this planet - part tragedy/part comedy. We're living out the story of human beings in North America. We're living out the story of the United States of America. We're living out the story of Red Sox Nation! We're continuing to live out the story of New England, of the great State of Massachusetts, and if you live here in North Andover we're living out the story of the town of North Andover. We're living out the story of Christians in North America, of Congregationalists in New England, of Trinitarian Congregational Church. All of these are true stories and ongoing stories, and we're a part of them, we're continuing to write these stories.

I had a good friend in Maine named David Lusty. David passed away in 2007, after a long and wonderful life. He was a man of faith and also a man who enjoyed telling a good story. But not only that - David lived out a beautiful story, a love story. In 1953 David Lusty purchased Harris Island to build and operate a marina. (I once purchased a townhouse in Maine. He bought an island!) During the summer of 1954 Harriet Sibley arrived on the scene to assist the growing business. They fell in love, got married and had a dream of operating an Inn together and of raising their family on Harris Island. And they wrote that exact story and lived their dream. The story of David and Haddy is still ongoing, not only through their two sons, Phil & Eric who run the Dockside Inn & Restaurant, but also through all four sons and all their children. The love story of David and Harriet is an ongoing story through a wonderful family.

I hope you know this morning that God's story is a love story as well. It's the old, old story of Jesus and his love. It's the story of God's love for you. It's the story of a people trying to live as God's sons and daughters, seeking to live out the dreams and desires of our Creator.

In our text this morning, Mary Magdalene did not feel like she was living a love story. As she walked to the tomb early in the morning, she was living a tragedy. She knew the goodness of Jesus, the power of Jesus and the love of Jesus. She had experienced all those things firsthand. Mary Magdalene is often mistaken for a prostitute mentioned but unnamed in the gospels. Mary Magdalene in the Gospels had a very specific past. In Luke 8 we learn that she lived a tormented life, possessed it says by 7 demons, until Jesus cast them out of her. Whatever you think of that the point is that her B.C. and A.D. were quite dramatically different. She became one of his most loyal and devoted followers. She was there at the foot of the Cross with John. She was there when Jesus was placed in the tomb. She was the first there on Easter morning to anoint the body with the burial spices. But she was living a tragedy until she heard Jesus speak her name, "Mary."

I hope and pray that in the story you find yourself in, you have heard that same thing - you've heard God speak your name - not audibly usually, but a tug of the heart, a filling of your soul, a joy that comes from beyond you and yet is in you.

D.L. Moody was a famous preacher of an earlier generation. He writes of God touching his heart one day. He left church and described it this way - *"I thought the old sun shone a good deal brighter than it ever had before - I thought that it was just smiling upon me; and as I walked out upon Boston Common and heard the birds singing in the trees, I thought they were all singing a song to me. It seemed to me that I was in love with all creation."* In this story we find ourselves in - God draws near and makes us more alive than we've ever been before. The Risen Christ brings new life. That's why ours is such a great story to live in - Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith walks beside us, all around us and within us, further inspiring the story.

I was reading in the news recently about Christian extremist protesters shouting mean and obscene things at people whose lifestyles and orientations they disagreed with. They also held signs with mean, vulgar and demeaning things on them. And I thought to myself - Those protesters are forgetting what story they're in. They're supposed to be in the story of Jesus and his love. That's not the story they're telling. Instead they're telling the story of Christians and their hatred. What story are we in?

Fred Craddock tells the story of a day he met a man named Ben Hooper. Mr. Hooper was having breakfast at a table next to Professor Craddock and his wife. They struck up a conversation and it came out that Craddock was a preacher. "I've got a story to tell you about a preacher. And Mr. Hooper told him about growing up in a small town in the Bible belt, and that his mother was a very colorful character in the town and she was not married when Ben Hooper was born, which back then in the Bible Belt was absolutely scandalous. When Ben was a child he began to attend a Baptist Church next to the apartment where he and his mother lived. He enjoyed the service but used to sneak out to avoid talking with anyone. One Sunday he got held up in the crowd and couldn't get out in time. It was then that he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was the preacher's hand. The pastor said, *"Now boy, I know you. You've been coming to our services for a while now. I think I know who you are. Why boy, you're a child of?"* (in the south you're often referred to as your father's child - "That's Jesse's boy." "That's Joe's girl.") *"Why boy, you're a child of?"* - and then he remembered who he was and what people said about him. *"Why boy, you're a child of God. And I see a striking resemblance. Now go, Son, claim your inheritance."*

Ben Hooper claimed his inheritance, his identity as a child of God. He went to college, then law school. He became an attorney, went into politics and became a two-terms governor of Tennessee. He got a new story that day as a boy. And that made all the difference.

We find ourselves, our true selves when we live in God's story - We discover who we're meant to be, as children of God. Living within this story gives our lives - Meaning, Direction, Purpose, Inspiration and Community. It weaves our little lives into the life and ministry of Christ, the Risen One. And there's nothing finer than that. I think it's also a good way to describe a faith commitment. It's simply saying to God, *"I want to be part of your story."*

Think about it.

Let's pray about it:

Risen Lord, we love you because you first loved us. We thank you that you continue to reach out to us, speaking our names, reminding us that individually and collectively, we are your children. Thank you that we can be a part of the ongoing story of your love. Help us to live that story this day, this week and always. In your name. Amen.