

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United
by The Rev. Capt Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

What Easter Gives Back

John 20:1-20

March 31, 2024

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G4n9-GhvBI

Jesus said, "Mary" She turned to Him and said, "My Master."

On Good Friday it seemed it was all over. She could have said on Good Friday what she said on Easter Sunday, "They have taken away my Lord." Yet, then she could not speak being overwhelmed. The Master whom she loved, who was her life, was crucified, and her whole world became a Good Friday world. All that she loved she had lost. And then, early on Easter day, in the mists of morning she looked into His sepulchre and found it empty. Still numbed by grief and half blinded by tears, she caught a glimpse of Him but mistook Him for the gardener. Her anguished words asked Him to tell her, if he had taken away her Lord, where he had laid Him. And then Jesus said, "Mary!"

What is in a name. Ah, a whole world is in a name. The whole history of a life and beauty is in a name when it is spoken like that.

No one had ever spoken her name as he had and in that very moment her world moved from a Good Friday world into an Easter world, from evening to morning, and everything that Good Friday had taken away, Easter gave back.

I

On that Easter morning Jesus gave us back **Himself**. And in so doing gives us hope.

The disciples had lost all hope. They had pinned all their hopes on Jesus. On that day in the garden, Jesus gave Mary hope, and now they thought He was gone, and with Him their dreams. Dreams can so easily be dashed. Can't they?

W. B. Yeats understood this when he wrote:

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

We all have dreams--dreams for ourselves and our work, dreams for our love ones. We have dreams about the future. And when things go wrong; when our dreams are crushed under foot, we find ourselves losing hope. When our work goes wrong and we leave without having been able to accomplish what we had dreamed; or when we lose our job. Or when the people we had believed in betrayed us. Or when the person who we loved dies; we wonder if we will ever be able to pierce the hopeless gloom that comes over our soul.

Dylan Thomas wrote a poem called "And Death shall Have No Dominion." In it, he declares that death shall have no dominion because, "while lovers be lost love shall not." It sounds not only defiant, but triumphant. Then we remember that if those we love be lost, death has dominion enough. Caitlin, the wife of Dylan Thomas understood this when Dylan died. She wrote a book and called it "Leftover Life to Kill". She felt hopeless.

I was asked to conduct a funeral a few years back. I arrived early to meet with the family and met the Priest who had just finished conducting the previous funeral as he was leaving. As I entered the office of the funeral home, I was greeted with a lady screaming and crying, saying, "He is alive, he is alive!" She began to run frantically in circles screaming, "He is alive. I just talked to him."

The funeral directors explained to me, as the noise in the chapel began to grow in strength and become louder and louder that the man in the coffin that they just had a full funeral service for was not related to the family. And that, even though the man looked something like the man in the picture the man who they thought was dead was actually in the living room of his sister having tea.

They didn't know what to do. Everyone was screaming at them every time they stepped out of the office. So I walked in the middle of the crowd and said. "Shut Uppppp! Why are you crying and yelling at the Funeral Director? This man you thought was dead is alive! Go celebrate and give thanks and live and love like you have never done before for you have faced death and overcome it...and make sure to go to church on Sunday and give thanks." Some started laughing and clapping. Then I said, "Now, get out of here and stop bugging me. I have a service to perform." They left laughing.

Jesus just said, "Mary".

That was it. The dawn broke through. The Son had risen. And with Him the darkness of Mary's life was gone. Everything the Friday before had taken away, was given back that day. The Friday before had taken away their hopes and dreams, their lives and their Lord. That morning gave back all that and more.

We come today to remember and rejoice. We do so not just because it happened so many years ago, but because it happens even today.

I don't know what you are going through; maybe you have been just diagnosed – like Princess Kate – with cancer, or you are grieving the loss of a loved one, or you lost your job, or just separated from your husband or wife, or perhaps you are simply discouraged with life itself. Let me promise you this, that there is hope because of Him.

II

On that day Jesus gave Himself back, and in doing so he gave Mary back **herself**. He made her whole again.

The message of Easter is that, Jesus gives us back *ourselves*. As the video clip said at the beginning. You are redeemed!! You are not who used to be; because you are redeemed. You are who you were always meant to be.

He said, "*peace be with you.*"

When Jesus was crucified the pieces of the people's lives--that had been for the first time in place--fell apart in their hands. They felt the brokenness as never before. Fear overwhelmed their faith, despair chased them. The emptiness that was there before His coming returned with greater intensity, for now they knew what they were missing. Until that first Easter morning, for it was then that He gave them back themselves.

A newspaper editor in England once asked his daughter who worked for him to write an article about David Livingstone, the Christian medical missionary to Africa. The editor had no sympathy with David Livingstone's faith, so he told his daughter to write the article without mentioning it. She went off to do all the research necessary for the article, but soon returned to tell her father that what he had asked her to do was impossible. She said that her article would not only mention Livingstone's faith, but would make it its major interest, for David Livingstone could not be explained apart from his faith. It defined him, making him what he was and giving him his life's work. What he did, he did for the love of Christ.

Whenever we look at the impact that Christ had on people's lives we see this. We look at Simon the man of sand, who becomes Peter the Rock. Or Saul the great, who becomes Paul the small--small in himself but mighty for God. Or James and John no longer fishermen, but sons of Thunder, Mary the woman caught in adultery became Mary the disciple.

He had a way of giving people back the selves they hoped to be and could be.

Now, if you don't think this is true, think of those who love you--whether that is a friend or family member, or one whom you have loved. Think of how you have been elevated by their belief in you. When others said, "you would fail." They said, "I have faith in you." When others rejected you; they received you. You were able to see yourself as a result through their eyes. When others gossip and say, "I don't know what he sees in her". He would say, "I do!" He sees what no one else sees. who she really is.

Now, that is what Jesus does on a vast scale. He believes in you; until you believe in yourselves, He loves you into loving and He gives us back ourselves.

Look at what the Word of God said happened to the disciples. They were no longer broken and beaten. They were no longer the shell of what they once were. Now, they could face what was to come without fear and filled with faith, not complaining, arguing and doubting, but believing.

Jesus said to an anxious fearful frustrated people "Peace be with you." And in doing so he gave them back themselves.

A guide at Blarney Castle in Ireland was explaining to some visitors that his job was not always as pleasant as it seemed. He told them about a group of disgruntled tourists he had taken to the castle earlier in the week.

"These people were anxious and complaining about everything," he said. "They didn't like the weather, the food, their hotel accommodations, the prices, everything. Then to top it off they were always anxious about arriving at every destination on time. So when we arrived at the castle, we found that the area around the Blarney Stone was roped off. Workmen were making some kind of repairs." "This is the last straw!" exclaimed one lady who seemed to be the chief faultfinder in the group. "I've come all this way, and now I can't even kiss the Blarney Stone."

"Well, you know," the guide said, "according to legend, if you kiss someone who has kissed the stone, it's the same as kissing the stone itself."

"And I suppose you've kissed the stone," said the exasperated lady.

"Better than that", replied the guide. "I've sat on it."

III

On that Easter morning Jesus gave Himself back, and in doing so he gave Mary back herself and with her ourselves. And Jesus gave us Heaven back.

When archaeologist began to examine Roman cemeteries, they found seven letters inscribed on many tombstones. They were the letters N F F N S N C. The words the letters stood for were so well known that they didn't have to be written in full; the letters were enough to declare their message. The words, of course, were Latin, and their meaning declared, "I was not, I was. I am not, I care not."

Imagine writing on a tombstone, "I care not." I can understand a person saying of himself that he didn't care whether he lived or died; I have heard people say that. There have been times and moods when most of us have felt like that. But I cannot understand anyone saying it of someone they love.

Archaeologists went into the tomb of one of the Pharaohs and they found a sarcophagus containing the mummified remains of a little child and a message the child's mother had left with her little one. She had written, "O my life, my love, my little one, would God I had died for thee!" I don't care?

Jeremy was born with Downs Syndrome and with other physical challenges At the age of 12,

Spring came, and the children talked excitedly about the coming of Easter. Doris told them the story of Jesus, and then to emphasize the idea of new life springing forth, she gave each of the children a large plastic egg.

"Now," she said to them, "I want you to take this home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?" "Yes, Miss Miller," the children responded enthusiastically all except for Jeremy. He listened intently; his eyes never left her face. He did not even make his usual noises. Had he understood what she had said about Jesus' death and resurrection? Did he understand the assignment? Perhaps she should call his parents and explain the project to them. That evening, Doris' kitchen sink stopped up. She called the landlord and waited an hour for him to come by and unclog it. After that, she still had to shop for groceries, iron a blouse, and prepare a vocabulary test for the next day. She completely forgot about phoning

Jeremy's parents.

The next morning, 19 children came to school, laughing and talking as they placed their eggs in the large wicker basket on Miss Miller's desk. After they completed their math lesson, it was time to open the eggs. In the first egg, Doris found a flower. "Oh yes, a flower is certainly a sign of new life," she said. "When plants peek through the ground, we know that spring is here." A small girl in the first row waved her arm. "That's my egg, Miss Miller," she called out. The next egg contained a plastic butterfly, which looked very real. Doris held it up. "We all know that a caterpillar changes and grows into a beautiful butterfly. Yes, that's new life, too." Little Judy smiled proudly and said, "Miss Miller, that one is mine." Next, Doris found a rock with moss on it. She explained that moss, too, showed life. Billy spoke up from the back of the classroom, "My daddy helped me," he beamed. Then Doris opened the fourth egg. She gasped. The egg was empty. Surely, it must be Jeremy's she thought, and of course, he did not understand her instructions. If only she had not forgotten to phone his parents. Because she did not want to embarrass him, she quietly set the egg aside and reached for another.

Suddenly, Jeremy spoke up. "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?" Flustered, Doris replied, "But Jeremy, your egg is empty." He looked into her eyes and said softly, "Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty, too." Time stopped. When she could speak again, Doris asked him, "Do you know why the tomb was empty?" "Oh, yes," Jeremy said, "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then His Father raised Him up." The recess bell rang. While the children excitedly ran out to the schoolyard, Doris cried. The cold inside her melted completely away.

Three months later, Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects at the funeral home during the visitation were surprised to see 19 eggs on top of his casket, all of them empty.

The message of Easter is simple, Jesus gives us himself, and in so doing, he gives back ourselves and eternal life. For we don't have eternal life because we are good. We have eternal life because God is Good! You think about that. Amen.

