

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 20: 1-18 Easter

It is easy to be critical from a distance. Like listening to our favorite political pundits, we might look into a situation and have lots of advice for those involved, critical of actions, answers for what is wrong, and clear solutions to offer. It is always muddier when you are in the story, in the drama, caught up in the dynamics, harder to see clearer, more aware of the catch 22s, of the complicated answers and less than perfect choices. And this is why we sometimes prefer to sit back and act like we are not involved. It is easier to offer answers and solutions from a distance. We even do this to ourselves at times, at older versions of ourselves – looking back and thinking “what an idiot?,” or “what was ‘I’ thinking?”

As readers of the scriptures, we have a tendency to scrutinize the actions of those recorded. We dissect their actions, often extracting lessons or either positive or negative examples. For example, what is Peter’s deal, grabbing a sword and slicing off a soldier’s ear one moment, only to deny Jesus hours later? Did he forget his medication? Or how could Judas betray our Lord, what kind of dark heart must he have had? Or silly Thomas, doubting, needing to put his hands in Jesus’ side. We may look into the story and presume to know more than they did, may be quick to assess judgment, conclusions, clear assessments. But, rather than looking down onto the story from a distance, what if we try to put ourselves into the story, as we tried to do in our service on Good Friday, to identify with some of these characters, and see and feel these events from their perspective.

And I wonder, if we put ourselves into the story if we might grasp the confusion they must have felt, the confusion both mentally and physically about what was happening, about what needed to happen. Because it seems they react in understandable ways, but being that they don’t comprehend what it is Jesus is doing, their actions and responses seem out of sync and out of kilter at every moment. They do what seems like the right thing to do, and yet, at every turn, it is assessed as the wrong response.

When Jesus and the disciples head towards Jerusalem and Thomas says, “let us go die with him,” he was being both dramatic, and admirable, feeling this sense of support and standing with Jesus whatever may come. But he is misguided at the same time. Because we know in hindsight, that Jesus must go alone. Jesus must go alone, and must die. And yet, we still look at Peter and think poorly of his being

scared and pulling back, we identify that as a weak human characteristic, trying to protect himself in the moment by saying that he did not know Jesus, thus denying his Lord.

And before that when Jesus wants to wash Peter's feet, Peter refuses, not wanting Jesus to serve him, not wanting Jesus to set an example of lowliness. He wants Jesus, and he at Jesus' side, to gain in importance and honor. He knows Jesus is higher than him, but is now in a posture lower than Peter and so Peter says no. And Jesus says, wrong answer. When Peter sees the soldiers coming to arrest Jesus and he pulls one of their swords and is ready to go at it. It is admirable response and shows his fervor and commitment. And yet Jesus says, wrong action, Peter. Jesus puts the guy's ear back on, tell Peter to take a chill pill, and he surrenders to the soldiers' custody.

Peter is the most fervent among us, trying desperately to be faithful and to do the right thing, but like a dance partner with two left feet, he cannot quite catch the rhythm.

Judas sees the absurdity of it all, realizes Jesus is not going to meet everybody's expectation and isolates himself, cashing in and separating himself from any implications, and we condemn him for it. Scripture and tradition have deemed that he was possessed or bore some particular darkness that would cause him to do such a thing.

And even on the morning of the resurrection, what is the right response? The disciples had given up hope, what else were they to do? And so, when they hear report of the empty tomb they come running to the tomb and are astonished to find it empty. And just as fast as they came, they are gone. I mean, who knows, but maybe they would have seen the angels and Jesus himself if they were scurrying around like overstimulated squirrels.

And when Mary goes to weep and mourn, she kind of gets chided for doing so. We read: "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. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" It is a rhetorical question designed to comment more than gather information, suggesting that she should not be weeping. Wrong response, because Jesus is alive.

And when Mary sees Jesus, what does she do? She does what anybody would do when they find their friend or loved one in good health, she clings to him,

embraces him. And yet, that too seems to be the wrong action. “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.”’” But how is she to know.

Have you ever felt that you keep getting things wrong, not quite in step, reacting and guessing your way along?

They all keep responding in normal ways, understandable ways, appropriate ways. When your friend faces adversity, you step up with them. When you realize you cannot actually do anything, you tend to pull back. When you lose someone, you weep. When you see someone you thought was lost, you embrace and cling. They keep responding in normal ways, conditioned and understandable responses. But, they did not understand what all was happening until later. They did not understand, nor would it be reasonable to understand at the time.

But the question is, with the privilege of a little hindsight, how do we adjust our responses now? What are the right responses, actions, or posture? How do we adjust our responses so that we are not out of sync with Jesus, like his disciples and friends and followers were in those final days, but in sync, so that we are not off kilter, but centered and directed by the Spirit.

What are the right reactions, the right impulses, the right responses?

One response is to accept, to receive. When Jesus wants to wash Peter’s feet, to take the posture of a servant, the right response is to say yes, wash me, and make me clean, however hard it is for me to say. When Jesus says that the son of man must suffer and be killed and rise again, rather than resisting, we say ok. We say yes. When Jesus says that this body will be broken for you, in your place, for your benefit, and when Jesus says that this cup is poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus says to accept it and receive it, we say yes, Lord, we will accept what you must do for us, and we will accept it and receive it.

When Jesus rises from the dead and says that you are both forgiven and commissioned to follow Jesus even still, the right response is to follow. When Jesus says that you are not to just sit back and go on with the normal, but to receive the holy spirit and to do the things we saw Christ do, the right response is to receive the holy spirit and to carry on the works of Jesus.

When Jesus says to love your neighbor as Jesus has loved us, the right response is not to respond to our neighbor in defensiveness and anger and resentment and

suspicions, but to love our neighbor as Jesus has loved us. Because, if we are honest, we tend to respond the things in our lives with a certain habitualness, common responses, impulses, avoidances, and so on. And so, part of our work is to identify and adapt our responses so that we are in sync with the one says to follow me, who says to carry on the work he started.

I think of the poem that we read this morning, which describes a posture – a posture not of rigidness or impulsiveness, but one that responds to the that which wants to carry us along, to lift us, support us.

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,

If one does not adjust their posture and the tension or tightness in their body in the water, they will fight the water and sink, struggling against the water, rather than float. You see, we could emerge from this Lenten, holy week, and easter season and go on responding and reacting as we always have, and if we do so, we will probably continue to be just as reasonable as we are out of sync with the Spirit, out of sync with what the Lord is doing. Yes, our responses will probably be deemed rational and appropriate, but always out of step with what God wants to do in us and through us.

Like the person who wishes to float on the water instead of sink, we must respond in our bodies and our spirits to what the Holy Spirit is doing.

so would I learn to attain
free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

I think Levertov names it succinctly right there – to come to accept and receive what God offers, love that we don't have to earn or justify, grace and forgiveness that we can accept and receive rather than living under a burden of trying to earn it. To learn to be embraced and carried along and directed by the Spirit.

He is risen (He is risen indeed). Grace and love and new life are yours. And grace and love and new life are yours to carry to others. So, may we find the Spirit's rhythm, that we may react and respond as God would have us, that we would walk

in step with the Spirit, carrying on the work and the character of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

so would [we] learn to attain
free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

And all God's people said...

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mt 28:1–10; Mk 16:1–8; Lk 24:1–12)

20 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. ² 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.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.’ ” ¹⁸ 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.