

Message for Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: John 20:1-18

Nothing between us

Our Lenten theme these past weeks has been “Between Me (God) and You.”

We’ve talked about barriers – those things, often of our own making – that come between us and God. We talked about covenant – God’s promise to stay in close and loving relationship with humankind. We observed God’s surprising willingness to renegotiate this covenant rather than to throw in the towel as circumstances change.

First there was the covenant with Noah after the flood: “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,” God says to Noah, “and with every living creature that is with you. The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:9-10). Even if things again get very bad, God says, I will not destroy you. I commit to sticking with you no matter what.

Then there was the covenant with Abraham and Sarah: “I will make you exceedingly fruitful,” God says to them. “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (Genesis 17:6-7). This time God asked for reciprocity: All males were to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant between God and the people. Let’s see your commitment in the flesh. Ouch!

We talked about the rules – the Ten Commandments – which were put in place to help the people of Israel live into their covenant with God. And we talked about how easy it is to break or ignore or undermine these rules. We human beings don’t hold up our end of the covenant. We go our own way. We erect barriers. We choose to live in darkness rather than in light.

But even then God sticks with us. God takes stock of the situation and makes an adjustment. God tries again. “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Which bring us to Jesus. God tried a new tack. Understanding that we human beings come to universal meaning deeply and rightly through the unique and ordinary, not the other way around, God chose to come to us in the unique and the ordinary, in the human person of Jesus. Someone just like us who we could relate to. In Jesus, we see God revealed in everyday life. We learn to know God up close and personal. We are taught by words and example what God requires. We are brought into a relationship where there are no barriers. A new covenant begins to be established: Our hearts are opened and we “Know the Lord.”

This is challenging, of course. Knowing God takes us into uncomfortable territory. Like betrayal, denial, rejection, torture and horrible death. “This is my body broken for you,” Jesus says as he anticipates his death. “This is your new covenant with God, sealed with my blood.” Broken bodies, spilled blood – these painful, horrible parts of our collective human experience are included in this new covenant. They, too, are recognized and held by God. They are not outside of God’s care and compassion. In

fact, they are often where God's love for us is most obvious, most powerful and life-changing.

Franciscan Richard Rohr writes: "Many of the happiest and most authentic people I know love a God who walks with crucified people and thus reveals and 'redeems' their plight as God's own. For them, God is not observing human suffering from a distance but is somehow *in* human suffering *with us and for us*. Jesus takes on our suffering, bears it, and moves through it to resurrection."

That's where we are today – at resurrection! Alleluia! Christ is no longer dead; he is risen! We know this. However, as Mary Magdalene approaches the tomb that first Easter morning, her heart is not singing. Far from it. She is still preoccupied with barriers. Unsurmountable barriers. Death is one – she saw Jesus suffer and die on the cross. Dead is dead. Definitely a barrier. The large, heavy stone rolled in front of the tomb where his body lies is another barrier. She doesn't expect either of these barriers to be removed. How could they be? She just needs to be there, in that place, near where Jesus' body lies. Near to him one last time. She needs to grieve. That is what this early morning trip to the graveyard is all about.

So when she turns the corner and sees that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb she is caught by surprise, the kind of surprise which makes you run the other way because it is so utterly impossible and unexpected. She jumps to conclusions: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," she tells the disciples, catching her breath. We don't even have his body anymore! Another barrier erected. The disciples run back to the tomb with her and corroborate what she has seen. Yes, it's true: Jesus' body is definitely not there.

Now aren't you a bit perplexed by the apparent equanimity of the disciples in the face of this momentous development? They see that the tomb is indeed empty, and then they turn around and return to their homes. I think I'd be a bit more like Mary. Too upset and nervous to be anywhere but right there, in that place, in the middle of the mystery, trying to figure out how to cross this new barrier and find out what happened. How distressing it all is. She is weeping, which is also something I can identify with.

In her anxiety she finally bends down and looks into the tomb herself. She sees two angels who are seated there where Jesus' body had lain. Aha! Maybe they know what happened. Where were they when the disciples looked in? The angels speak to Mary: "Woman, why are you weeping?" She replies, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." But before that conversation can go any further, her attention is caught by movement behind her. It's the gardener, she thinks. Surely he will know what's going on. He, too, asks her why she is weeping. "Who are you looking for?" he says. Mary makes her appeal: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Oh, please, don't let this final barrier of loss and uncertainty stand between me and the body of the one I have loved. I want to know where he is.

Then Jesus – for it is Jesus – calls her by name. "Mary," he says. Just that: "Mary." It's an intimate gesture. An act of familiarity. Her eyes fly open. All the barriers come tumbling down. Her whole body fills with joy! "Rabbouni!" she cries out in response. Rabbouni is an Aramaic word, a very personal form of address, a term of endearment. My beloved teacher! It is you! She reaches out to touch him but he says, "Don't hold onto me. Instead go and tell my brothers, 'I am ascending to my Father and

your Father, to my God and your God.'" Tell them that I am alive and that our relationship, your relationship with God continues.

In fact, the relationship not only continues but it expands. We, as Jesus' followers are drawn into ever closer relationship with God. Jesus' resurrected ascent to God makes permanent that which was revealed about God during the incarnation. The love of God embodied in Jesus was not of temporary duration, lasting only as long as his earthly life. Rather, the truth of Jesus' revelation of God receives its final seal in his return to God. It forever changes for us the way God is known.

The ascension of the resurrected Jesus is the confirmation that the believing community – those who follow him – now know God as Jesus knows God. Jesus has opened up the possibility of a new and full relationship with God. Iniquities are forgiven and sins are remembered no more. The intimacy of Jesus' relationship with God the Father, now marks the believing community's relationship with God. We are drawn into God's family, into a relationship that cannot be severed, no matter what. All barriers are gone. There is nothing between us. No matter what may happen – betrayal, pain and even death – we are ultimately and eternally safe and secure in God's everlasting arms.

I'd like to share with you some words from the Goshen College Lenten devotions. Professor Andrew Hartzler reflected on the theme, "Nothing between us." He writes:

"Experiencing the reality of God's presence with us, the Holy Spirit in and among us, is a result of Christ shattering the barriers between our human existence and the presence of the Living God. This is a powerful truth. However for us to experience the peace that passes all understanding, we must engage in an active pursuit of God's

presence. Becoming aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit amidst the ups and downs, joys and sorrows and chaos around us requires a daily resolution to seek and find God.

”One of my favorite writers,” he says, “is Sarah Young. She frames some of this daily conversation with the Holy Spirit in her devotional book entitled ‘Jesus Calling.’

The following are some of her thoughts:

I (Christ) reside in the deepest depths of your being, in eternal union with your spirit. You need Me every moment. Your awareness of your need for Me is your greatest strength. Your inadequacy presents you with a constant choice – deep dependence on Me or despair.

“Let us not despair,” Prof. Hartzler continues, “knowing that Christ has overcome the world, and has paved the way for us to encounter the spirit of the Living God. Praise be to God!”

Sisters and brothers, the message of Easter is loud and clear: God remains in covenant with us. We have been drawn even closer in. We are now part of the family. There are no barriers between us. With the Apostle Paul we can confidently say that we are “convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

This is the truth and it can be trusted. We are leaning on and encircled by God’s everlasting arms.

Alleluia! Amen.