

Isaiah 25:6-9 (CEB)

On this mountain, the Lord of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavor, of choice wines well refined. He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, the shroud enshrouding all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe tears from every face; he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth, for the Lord has spoken. They will say on that day, "Look! This is our God, for whom we have waited—and he has saved us! This is the Lord, for whom we have waited; let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

John 20:1-18 (CEB)

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

When I was 15, I spent my summer in Savannah, Georgia with my grandfather, whom I called Pawpaw, working for an uncle's construction company. Pawpaw did odds and ends around the sites, from getting supplies to actual construction tasks. I spent that summer as his helper, learning as much as I could. Pawpaw had little patience for my laziness, I was 15 after all, but he got me whipped into shape pretty quickly. I remember after my first day on the job I went to bed at like 7:00 because I was so exhausted. A few weeks in, my uncle found himself in need of childcare, so I was taken off of the job site and became the babysitter for the day, which was fine with me because I got paid the same and they had a pool nearby. It wasn't just my cousins I had to watch, however, my uncle had a business partner in from out of the country, and he had his daughter with him. She only spoke Spanish, which I do not speak aside from a few words and phrases, but we made it work. The day was going great, we had some pool time, I made everyone Kraft macaroni and cheese for lunch, and then we went into the basement to play pool. I really wanted to make my uncles' business partner's daughter feel welcome, so I went above and beyond to make sure she was included in all of our activities. Sometime into the game I noticed that my youngest cousin was missing, so we paused the game and began to search for her. We looked everywhere, from the top of the house to the bottom, inside and out, and she was nowhere to be found. I don't know if you've ever lost track of a child, or as a child lost track of a parent, but it is a terrible experience. Your heart races. You're so frantic that fear just consumes you. You break out in sweats even when it's freezing cold. No one enjoys this feeling. I felt that way the entire time we looked for my cousin. We looked for probably 45 minutes before I came to the realization that I had to call my aunt at work and tell her I lost her daughter. It's not a phone call you want to have to make, but I swallowed my pride and called. She was understandably upset at the news, but I remember her being surprisingly calm - if I remember correctly this wasn't the first time she'd run off and so my aunt wasn't jumping to any conclusions yet. I was still shaking when I hung up the phone when another call came in, and it was the neighbor. It turned out that sometime while we were playing pool my cousin got bored and went to see her friend next door without telling anyone. It was an incredible relief to know that she hadn't run away or been abducted, but then the neighbor began to berate me for being a bad babysitter. She claimed, falsely I should say, that my cousin had been over for hours and that I didn't even care. I had no clue that the neighbor was a friend and that she and my cousin played together a lot, and frankly, I had been so frantic that it was hard to think clearly. I called my aunt back and let her know the good news, that everything was now fine, it had just turned out that my cousin got bored with all the attention given to our Spanish-speaking friend, so she went in search of her own fun. While I was obviously relieved, it still took quite some time to get my heart rate down, plus the scolding I took from the neighbor left me quite frazzled. Despite it all ending okay, I was not asked to babysit again that summer, and I'm not very surprised I wasn't - I wouldn't have asked me back, either. Despite my embarrassment over the whole ordeal, it ended up being very formative for me. The next summer I became

a camp counselor at a day camp, and whenever we went on field trips I was hyper vigilant in keeping track of those in my care. I remember a particularly stressful trip to Six Flags, the amusement park in Atlanta, and I think I counted all six kids I had to keep an eye on every 30 seconds, just to be absolutely sure I didn't lose one. And I didn't, nor have I ever lost a kid in my care again.

I tell you that story because I think I know exactly how Mary Magdalene felt when she went to the tomb and found it empty. I can't know the grief she was still feeling at Jesus' death, none of us can, but I can at least empathize with that horrible feeling of losing track of a person you thought was right there and you don't know what to do. The sudden anxiety of the situation led her to go see Peter and the beloved disciple for help - help in searching for Jesus' body, but also help in making sure she hadn't gone crazy because of her grief. They went with her to check too, and sure enough he wasn't there, the linen wrappings that had been lovingly wrapped around his body were laying empty in heaps where his body had been laid. They were probably even more frantic than I ever was because the person they lost was dead, so it's not like he could have just gotten up and waltzed away, right? Their immediate reaction would likely have been that someone must have taken Jesus' body to desecrate it further. It was a pretty safe bet considering Jesus had been betrayed by one of his closest friends, given a mock trial, sentenced to death, and then crucified for crimes he didn't commit - those that had plotted to entrap Jesus in this horrific end certainly could have had even more devious plans, including taking his body to ensure he couldn't have a proper burial. It's a lot to have to process, especially when you're already grieving the loss of someone so very special to you. When you're in the middle of that kind of fear and anger and grief, it's impossible to see even the most obvious of things. Mary Magdalene spoke to a man she assumed was the gardener, and through her tears she begged him to tell her where Jesus had been taken. It was only when the living Jesus said her name aloud that she finally understood. No one had taken his body after all. He really had gotten up himself. He really had defeated the bounds of death.

As I reread this familiar story over the past few weeks in preparation for today, I was struck by Jesus' question to Mary before she recognized him. "Who are you looking for?" Jesus said. I have a strong connection with the question because of my own story of frantically searching for someone, but it's more than that. We spend a lot of time and energy searching for people and things throughout our whole lives. There are relatively mundane and routine searches that we go through on a daily basis. Where'd I put my wallet and keys? Where should we eat dinner? What movie should we watch? Where can we find a contractor to fix that pesky leak? Where can I find a good dentist? What mechanic won't charge an arm and a leg to fix my car? And then there are the searches that are more philosophical or bigger in nature. Where can I go to meet friends at my age? What am I supposed to do with my life? When will I finally meet Mr./Mrs. Right? Where can I find happiness? Life is a non-stop exercise in looking for something or someone. So, when I heard Jesus' question to Mary, I found myself asking what and who I'm looking for. Where

am I spending all my energy frantically searching, but not finding? Like many Americans, I often find myself looking for satisfaction in things rather than deeper connection with people, and living in a pandemic certainly hasn't helped. This is why companies like Amazon make untold billions of dollars every year - we buy stuff to fill holes we don't know how else to fill. We keep searching and searching, and stuff just doesn't do it, so we stupidly think we just haven't found the right stuff yet and keep on buying more. There are many other searches that might consume us, and industries make a killing off of our desperation - there are reasons why there are so many people that fall victim to pyramid and other get rich quick schemes, why there are so many dating apps, why there are so many people selling shortcuts to our deepest desires. I fear that we, like Mary, get so blinded by our searches that we cannot see the answer right in front of us.

The simplest and best answer, the answer that builds our faith, the answer that is the reason we gather today, the answer that is right in front of us, is Jesus. Now, to just leave it at "Jesus is the answer" is the laziest possible solution to anything. So, we can't do that. We need a why - why is Jesus the simplest and best answer to all that we have been looking for? It's not easy to answer, not because I don't know, but because there's a lot to it. He's the simplest and best answer for many reasons, but the biggest, most obvious - especially on Easter Sunday - is because he is risen. His resurrection means his kingdom isn't a fantasy, it's here and it's real and it's for us. And his kingdom being a present reality given to us means the worries of this life, from the most minor and insignificant to the most life changing, don't really matter at all. Which is a nice thing to hear, but it means very little when you're in the midst of feeling anxious and worried about anything, big or small. So, like children who are never satisfied, we need to keep asking why. Why is Jesus' resurrection and present kingdom the answer? Because of what we have been taught to do in his reign. This past Thursday night, Maundy Thursday, was the embodiment of this, as Jesus taught us that we are to love as he has loved us, it's the mark of being his disciple. He taught us how to love throughout his life and ministry and in his death and resurrection. So, this is the real answer, the answer that isn't just a bumper sticker quote, but something that we can put into practice and see fruit. Because if we love as Jesus loved us - broadly, without limit, defying all expectations, and despite what anyone else thought of it - we'll find whatever it is we seek. Are you looking for wealth? Begin to love your neighbors like Jesus loves us and you'll find a kind of wealth that you can't possibly obtain by working 100 hours a week. While it might not pay your rent, you will still have to work for a living I'm afraid, the deeper relationships formed by this kind of love will allow you to find a community that gives you unlimited and unconditional affection and care during all of life's seasons. Money simply cannot buy that. And that loving community leads us to a quality of life we didn't think was possible, despite how much money is or isn't in the bank. Looking for love? It's the same story. Engaging people in love, practicing the love that led Jesus to the cross for us, makes life more fulfilling. It might not get you dates or replace Tinder on your phone, but you will find deep satisfaction from a loving community of

support and care. What about those whose lives are in the midst of desperation who're looking for hope? Loving as Jesus loved us won't do much for them, will it? Except it will, when we, who are in positions of power, begin to love as Christ loved us, because it's in our devotion to Jesus' way that systemic poverty and oppression are broken and people are given the hope they so desperately seek, that Jesus died and rose to give them.

Maybe it's not the answer we expect, because, let's face it, loving like Jesus doesn't solve the problems we've been searching for answers to. But - and this is why it's so important - loving like Christ gives us a new kind of life, where those problems we have been searching our whole lives for answers to and not finding don't seem as big or important or all consuming. It changes our perception and our focus, so all that we have to be consumed by is love for one another, and it's only that love, the love of Christ's resurrection, that will fill the holes we are seeking to fill. Our faith in Christ's resurrection gives us assurance of eternal life, but it also gives us assurance of a life well lived, and that, at the end of the day, is all any of us is ever really looking for. As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection with our exuberant shouts of Hallelujah - may we remember Jesus coming face to face with one of the people that loved him the most and who didn't recognize him even as he asked, "who are you looking for?" Think about all that you're searching for and find the answer that is right in front of you: our risen lord, whose love took him to the cross for us, whose love defeated death for us, and whose love continues to promise us abundance in our life and in the life to come. Thanks be to God for this Good News.