

"The Always More of God"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: Colossians 3: 1-4; John 20: 1-18

Colossians 3:1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

John 20:1-18

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.

Choral Anthem: "How Beautiful" by Twila Paris

Offered by Organ, Chancel Choir, Hand Bell Choir, and Brass

Sermon

For the music and the faith and the people who bring the two together,

let the church say "Amen!"

For the spirituals and songs, hymns and psalms

that stir our souls, calm our nerves,

point us toward the One who saves,
and inspire us to aspire for the greatest good, united in
Christ,

let the Church say, *"Amen!"*

The Always More of God

A participant in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

was in a MARTA bus early on Easter morning
as the bus approached Peachtree Christian Church.

In front of their church was a huge wooden cross

with flowing white cloth draped over the arms,
just like the one we have on our church lawn.

The bus driver must have been thinking about the small crosses and flowers

we often see on the sides of highways and roadways
to commemorate folks who have been hurt or passed away in
accidents,

because when the bus driver saw the huge cross on Easter morning
he suddenly exclaimed, *"My goodness! Who died?"*

The Always More of God

Walter Brueggemann speaks of the "always more of God."

We think all is over, that there isn't enough,

that supplies and spirits and souls are scarce.

And here comes God, promising abundance.

More! More grace, more joy, more love, & even more life after life on earth is done.

In the loving arms of God we find we have more than enough;

we discover an abundance, an overflowing, an extravagance of love and hope.

“One of Brueggemann’s most helpful themes

is the contrast between scarcity and abundance.

We live, he says, with “anxious scarcity”:

we never think we have enough of anything; we always want more.

But the Bible operates with the idea of abundance.

There is enough. [The Lord does provide.]

The story of the loaves and fishes is a paradigm of God’s abundance,
the saving antidote to the anxiety of scarcity.”[\[1\]](#)

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead into life everlasting

is a paradigm of God’s abundance,

evidence that the nature of God is to always start something new.

The most distinguishing characteristic of God

is the Lord’s ability to create something new.

God can and did start a new cosmos out of chaos,

a new nation out of a wandering Armenian,

a new liberation movement out of a baby named Moses,

a new Temple and a new Jerusalem and a new people of
God

out of the lost, the last and the least.

God built a new church out of frightened disciples,

a new Disciples of Christ movement out of frontier men and women,

and a significant church here in Decatur in the Shealy living room

90 years ago on a Christmas afternoon. *Merry Christmas,
indeed!*

*The abundant gift of Christian hospitality graces Decatur
still!*

Put away your fears of scarcity;

choose to take on, to claim, to celebrate the always more, the abundance of
God.

The Always More of God

On the first day of the week

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early.

Earlier that week she had stood at the foot of the cross on Calvary and wept.

Mary had heard Jesus utter his last words, *"It is finished."*

She was there for him when he released his heavenly soul from his earthly body.

She had gone home and mourned.

In her heart and mind there was a painful void

that would last an hour, a day, a lifetime.

She treasured memories of days gone past;

she relived precious moments and experiences,

keeping them alive by her choice to remember the love.

Then something new moved in to fill the empty place:

a desire for closure;

a renewed purpose to take care of that which must be attended to;

the will to put one foot in front of the other;

a deeper sense of the presence of God.

Now, early in the morning, after a sleepless night of tossing and turning,

she arose and went to the tomb to take care of the body.

Love is willing to do the difficult thing. This we know. This we know.

Mary was looking for closure.

How do you find closure when that which you have held dear is swept away? Gone?

She may have thought, *"There is one thing I can do.*

I cannot bring him back to life, but I can take care of his body.

I can prepare his body for a proper burial."

However, when she arrived at the tomb she found the body missing.

Someone must have moved Jesus' body.

In her shock, anger, amazement, surprise,

Mary ran and told Simon Peter and another disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.

The disciples then ran to the tomb, finding it empty.

Simon Peter went home.

The other disciple believed that Jesus was resurrected,

so he went home, too.

Mary resisted belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead into life everlasting.

We can relate;

we've been there, staring into the abyss,

feeling all of the loss

and little of the hope.

For the second time that day Mary Magdalene thought,

"Someone must have moved Jesus' body!"

She stood outside the tomb and wept.

She stooped low to go inside, and to her surprise saw two angels.

They said, *"Woman, why are you weeping?"*

They were giving her room to express herself, to unload her grief.

She said to them, *"They have taken away my Lord,*

and I do not know where they have laid him."

She turned around and Jesus Christ was there for her, bright as the morning sun,

but she did not recognize him.

Jesus said to her, *"Woman, why are you weeping?"*

Whom are you looking for?"

He, too, gave Mary the room to express herself.

Assuming Jesus to be a gardener,

Mary asked him whether someone had taken her Lord's body.

You see, she had come to the tomb to take care of the body.

She was looking for closure, yet right before her very face was a new beginning.

The Always More of God

You know as well as I that when we are dead set on looking for closure

from a difficult or painful past, a tragedy or trauma,

it is so hard to see the new openings, opportunities, beginnings,

a new kind of normal,

the newness of life that God graciously places
before us

We know what it is like to be so full of grief, of anger,

to feel empty, to be filled with nothing but a sense of loss

that you only see the void

and miss the Spirit of hope that is filling it and you to
overflowing.

Mary had a heart full of grief,

and when she emerged from the tomb she mistook God for a gardener.

She had gone into the tomb looking for closure,

and she emerged to be confronted, welcomed, enfolded with a new beginning.

Even though she initially mistook and misunderstood Christ's presence,

God was there for her to be blessed and a blessing.

Like a gardener,

God weeds and feeds and plants good seeds in the rich soil of our souls.

Like a gardener,

God's springtime of new life always follows the winters of our lives.

Martin Luther said, *"Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection*

not in books alone but in every leaf of springtime."

The Always More of God

How do you find closure?

Mary needed to give Jesus a proper burial.

Jesus needed to return to assure his beloved disciples that all is well,

that sin no longer holds sway over our lives,

that forgiveness is more than a word --forgiveness is a way of life --

and that death has lost its sting!

How do you find closure?

My neighbor lost his abusive father to death, and needed to hear, to know, to believe

that in life after life his dad was now whole,

was made well, was saved and redeemed;

my friend now has a new, changed relationship with his dearly departed,

and in turn he has a new relationship with the living.

He himself is a new man, a new husband, a new father.

There is always more in the ways of God

For closure is there someone you need to forgive, or to ask for forgiveness?

For closure is there a blessed soul to whom you need to say thank you,

to give expression to the gratitude you silently carry within?

For closure is there a relationship that was once alive,

is lost or misplaced or misunderstood,

and now in need of an extreme makeover?

Mary was not the first to emerge changed from the tomb.

Jesus of Nazareth went in a broken, lifeless body, and he emerged triumphant.

Is there a change in your future

that will have its creative genesis in a God of resurrection power,

in the Always More of God?

The loving nature of Jesus Christ is to always start something new.

New beginnings, fresh starts, blessed opportunities of something new

unfold like flowers before us, fragrant and beautiful,

ready and waiting to be appreciated,

inhaled, pronounced good, and celebrated.

The Always More of God

God in Christ conquered death and sin in one fell swoop.

The stone has been rolled away.

The tomb in the cemetery is empty.

Jesus stands before you and calls your name.

You know his voice,

and you feel his presence,

inviting you into the newness of life in Christ.

Thanks be to God, when we look for closure, the Holy Spirit offers, invites, calls us

to new beginnings, to walk in the newness of life, to live into our baptism.

New beginnings commence when you cultivate your faith,

when you foster faithful relationships,

when you discover you can actually let go and let God.

Let go of difficult pasts,

grow through the pain,

and step boldly into newness of life.

Reseed, cultivate, reap what you sow through the Gardener,

who meets you wherever you are right now, and leads you into a new day.

My father, George Calvert, loved to preach, *“Jesus never promised us a rose garden,*

*but he did promise to be with us in
the garden.”*

The Gardener knows we sometimes encounter sudden chutes and steep ladders,

crosses and tombs and loss, yet we are never alone.

God is found both in your hearts and *“where cross the crowded ways of life.”*

The Always More of God

What is it about Georgia that we collect such fine preachers?

Fred Craddock, Cynthia Hale, Joanna Adams, Andrew Young,

Frank Harrington, Tom Long, Barbara Brown Taylor, Walter Brueggemann...

the list goes on and on.

Is it something in the red clay? The churches? The seminaries? The Spirit of God?

All I know is that a few years ago I went to a preaching workshop near here.

Both Barbara Brown Taylor and Walter Brueggemann

preached that evening, and they waxed poetic for 30 or 40 minutes apiece.

I walked out afterward into the Atlanta night air

and looked up and said out loud,

"It has all been said. God, I quit!"

At that moment I turned in my credentials and cards and certifications. I was done.

And then, five minutes later, I remembered that I had been baptized.

Before I was formed in the womb, the Lord knew me.

God blessed my baptism with the Living Water of Jesus Christ,

and placed a call upon my soul to serve, to shepherd,

to be and share the Good News with joy and sincerity.

I could not quit that night, or any night.

And neither will you, my friends.

The Body of Christ has only just begun.

You see, there is more to do,

more to say,

more to share,

more to serve,

more communities to rebuild,

more oppressed to liberate,

more smiles to give away

and more spiritual miles to travel with one another on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

Are you like me?

Sometimes we feel just like the young woman overheard in the bank line who said,

"I can't be overdrawn; I still have checks left!"

We can't and won't stop now; we still have love left! An abundance of love...

How are you experiencing the "always more of God" in your life?

What new thing is God going to do in and through you?

What would you do if you knew God would not let you fail?

Who would you be

if you would only allow yourself to trust in God's promise

of healing closures and new beginnings?

The Always More of God is at work in you,

creating and sustaining a new life in Christ.

Let it set you free and use you up!

You know, we should not arrive at death's door all prim and proper

in a pretty and well-preserved body.

Instead we ought to arrive breathlessly,

skidding broadside through the pearly gates,

thoroughly used up, totally worn out,

and loudly proclaiming, *"Wow! What a ride!"*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] John M. Buchanan, "Time for poetry", [Christian Century](#), Aug 12, 2010.