

Staying (Easter)

John 20:1-18

April 4, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

I haven't shared a Daisy story with you in a while. You've heard and seen her in action over the past year, of course, so I guess there hasn't been much need to give you an update. Daisy is three years old. She's plenty smart, but I'll admit that her humans haven't tried real hard to teach her much beyond her initial housebreaking phase. I've been working on getting her to come when I call her in from the backyard, usually when she's barking her head off at an imagined neighborhood threat. She's coming in somewhat regularly, but it's hard because those imaginary neighborhood threats are so important and enticing. Once she comes in and runs directly to the treat drawer, if and only if I tap her back, she'll sit for her treat. She is, however, completely hopeless when it comes to "stay." She has no idea what it means and no desire to learn.

Depending on the circumstances and depending on personality, humans can be good at "stay." Some of us have proved quite talented at staying at home over the pandemic. Others of us have really struggled with feelings of isolation and loneliness. There are places and situations where it's fine with us to stay put, and others where we want to escape as quickly as possible, because they are uncomfortable for us.

Generally speaking, it's hard for us to stay when the situation is sad, when someone we love is hurting, when there is pain of whatever sort. There are plenty of those times when we have no options but to stay, but if there is even a somewhat gracious way to slip away, we tend to take it. We can persuade ourselves that the right thing to do is go to visit our friend in the hospital, but it's hard to stay longer than a few minutes, and we can't deny the big sigh of relief when we walk out the doors into the fresh, outside air. We don't know what to say, we don't know what to do, it leaves us uncomfortable and looking for an escape. Sometimes, the person who is hurting can tell us what they need. I've had people say to me, "Please just sit next to me and hold my hand." Even so, that gets hard after a few minutes.

It struck me, then, that the Gospel of John tells us that Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb. John's telling of Easter morning has Mary going to the tomb while it was still dark. He doesn't say why, but we soon find out that Mary is one of those people who is gifted at staying in the midst of painful situations. She goes

to the tomb, finds the stone moved away, and runs to tell Peter and the disciple John keeps calling “the disciple Jesus loved.” They come running to see for themselves, look inside the tomb, see the cloths where the body had been. John says the beloved disciple “believed,” but it’s not clear at all what it is that the disciple believes, because neither of them stay. They leave. They go back home. There’s nothing they can do at this point. They don’t know where Jesus’s body is either. Looking at the empty tomb isn’t making them feel any better; in fact, it’s making them feel more helpless and more sad than they had when they woke up. They can’t stay, so they don’t.

But Mary stays. John says she “stood.” She stays put, right where she is, and cries. That’s all she can do. She isn’t feeling any better than the other two disciples, but they left and she stayed. She’s still crying when she bends over to look into the tomb. Instead of the linen cloths, she sees two angels. And she’s not afraid, unlike most other people who encounter angels in Scripture. She turns around, back out toward the garden, and sees Jesus but makes a completely logical deduction that he must be the gardener. And then, in one of the most touching scenes in the Bible, he calls her by name and she recognizes him as her teacher and Lord.

Mary stays. And she is the first to see the risen Jesus, the first to hear his voice, the first to speak to him, the first to receive instructions on how to proclaim the good news. Staying was hard. It was sad and painful, and there was nothing she could do to make it easier or better. But *while she is still weeping*, she witnesses the resurrection. In the midst of the pain and sadness she thinks she can do nothing but endure, she sees the new life that Jesus brings.

Like Mary, we have wept. Perhaps we are still weeping. Like Peter and the beloved disciple, we have felt pain and tried to escape by means of any number of things. We have not been able to outrun the grief nor avoid it successfully. But if we can stay, if we can stay with ourselves and with others when they are hurting, if we can stay, it is in the midst of the suffering that new life and resurrection appear.