

Sermon for Easter Sunday 2013 John 20:1-18 "Tag! You're It!"

Each Easter season, I reread the story of Jesus' resurrection and find a new question in it. Some people, who are undoubtedly brighter than I am, read it and find answers, but for me, I have to work my way to answers by starting with questions. For better or worse, this morning you're going to journey with me and my question du jour, and maybe by the time we're done with it, we may have an answer or two...or maybe just some more interesting questions to pursue.

Here's where I get stuck in this story: we've just heard the story – the disciples go to the tomb where Jesus had been laid, and discover that he is not there. All they see in the tomb is the neatly folded cloths that had wrapped Jesus' body. They leave. Mary Magdalene also is there, and is sitting in the garden, weeping. She sees angels sitting in the tomb, who question why she is weeping. She says she is sad because she doesn't know where Jesus' body has gone to, and no sooner than she says this, but Jesus is behind her. It takes her a few seconds to understand that it is Jesus to whom she speaks, and when she does, she reaches out to embrace him, but he says "Don't! I'm in transit to be with my heavenly Father, and you can't touch me right now. Just go tell the others you have seen me and that I'm headed up to heaven."

There are probably a number of questions that come to mind when we hear this. Why did Mary see the angels, but Peter and John did not? Why did Jesus appear to her, and not to Peter and John? What's that "don't touch me" business about?

They are all good questions, but I have a differen on that I'm stuck on: why did Jesus come back after his death?

Why would he come back? We could certainly understand him saying, "I wash my hands of that place. I talked and talked and explained and explained and even performed all sorts of miracles, and still they didn't understand what I was trying to teach. And then they decided they had to kill me off. This was a perfectly good body, still had lots of miles left in it, and they had to go and crucify me! I'm outta here."

But that's not what he did. He did come back. He came back despite the fact that the Gospel of John tells us that Peter and John looked into that empty tomb and they "saw and believed," presumably, that his body was taken to heaven. But then the evangelist adds another line, one that may hold a clue for us: "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

So they believed something had happened, that the Lord's body had been taken away by divine power, but they didn't really get the whole "resurrection from the dead" thing.

And all Mary knew was that she was grieving the death of Jesus and wanted to know if someone had stolen his body from the grave, since the stone that had sealed the tomb was rolled away when she first got there.

His body was hidden from her...

...hmmm, a little bit like that childhood game "Hide and Go Seek."

Sometimes when I get stuck on a question, I got back to the games of my childhood...they help me think through how things work. So "Hide and Go Seek"...how does it work?

Someone who is designated as "It" must close her eyes while everyone else runs and conceals themselves. The person who is "it" must count out loud for a period, then she must go find at least one of the people who are in hiding. After the player designated as "it" finds another player, the found player must run to base, before he is tagged by "it." After the first player is caught, he calls out "Ollie Ollie oxen free" to signal the other hidiers to return to base for the next round. Pretty straightforward, right?

So does this fit our story? It might, if we imagine Mary is "it," the seeker, and Jesus is the one who is concealed...a time period has passed since he was hidden, and she is searching, and in fact doesn't even begin to know where to find him. But she feels like she has to find him, that it is important. So she asks the angels, and she asks the mysterious man in the garden, who turns out to be...Jesus! And Jesus suggests that she call "Ollie Ollie oxen free" to the disciples, to tell them that they will all get together soon before he finally goes to his heavenly father in heaven.

But that still doesn't answer the question of why Jesus comes back after his death, even though Hide and Seek has helped us understand what's going on with Mary Magdalene a little better.

Well, if children's games seem like a helpful tool to untangle our questions, maybe another children's game will do the trick.

Hmmm...what game? Dodgeball? No, the school systems are banning that one, we'd better not do that. Basketball? No, we're all too short. Chess? Definitely not. It makes our heads hurt. Gee, Magic Eight Ball? Nope. The answers are so rarely conclusive!

Okay, I've got it...how about Tag?

I can see your skepticism on your faces, but let's think about the rules of Tag. It starts off very much like Hide and Go Seek. There's someone who is designated as "it" who then has to run around and try to touch, or tag, another person in the group, so that the new person is "it" and everyone else runs to avoid being tagged.

Tag. What does that have to do with theology? Well, work with me here, folks.

Let's start with the premise that Jesus is "it." That's the easy part. We know that Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah who died on the Cross to redeem us, is the ultimate "it." He has been tagged by virtue of his divinity to be the only one who can save us. So, as "it," Jesus has been on earth as one of us, as a human being, to...what? Play tag with us?

In a weird way, yes. He has been playing tag with us. He has been touching each of us and saying "You're my beloved. You're it." He has been willing to play the game by human rules. Unfortunately, it was a game that had a pretty unpleasant end, as we heard about on Good Friday. He got tagged by the religious leaders and Pilate and was sentenced to death. Sounded like the end of the game for this player, but like all really expert players, he tweaked the rules a bit, added some holy grace. The tag didn't really end the game, although it changed it. He was still "it," the one who was our source of salvation, and he was perfectly fine with continuing to be "it."

But Jesus had a problem. He had been playing with a bunch of disciples, good folks, but they weren't the brightest folks, and he was afraid that all he had taught them, all the fine points of the game of redemption, really hadn't stuck. Those of you who have coached the under-5 year old soccer teams know what I'm talking about here.

So even though Jesus had been tagged, and by rights should have stepped out of the game, he still had something to do. He had some tagging to do.

He needed to come back to earth and tap his followers on the shoulder and say "You're it. I am going to be in heaven with my father, and I need you to continue the game. I need you to go out into the world and share the game, its rules, its joys, its frustrations. I want you to tell the story of the greatest tag-player of all time, and all the ways that your lives have been enriched by participating. You're it. Go out and tell everyone about this!"

Ahhh...that makes sense now. Jesus had to come back, to remind everyone he had told them this was going to happen. He would die, but he would rise again, and would sit at his heavenly Father's right hand. Jesus had to come back to remind them that was it their job now to share the story. They were "it." He'd coach from the sidelines when and if it was really necessary, but it was for them to continue the game.

And the thing we are about to do now, this sacrament of Holy Baptism? How does this fit into the game?

You might say that each of these three little ones is being tagged. Tagged as God's own beloveds, tagged as ones who will, over time, learn how to play the game. As they grow in their knowledge of the story of Jesus, the one who died and overcame death to rise again, they will understand that they can share that glorious story, too, and the hope that is embodied in that story. They are tagged as Christians.

Tag. You're it. Go and share the story. Live the promise. Sing it out: Alleluia! Amen.