

Sermon on John 20:11-18

By Martin Niemoller

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, and seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her. (John 20:11-18)

EASTER! Jubilation fills all of Christendom today. “The Lord is risen, he is truly risen!” And it would seem that all creation joins in the joyful shout. The might of winter is broken, anticipations of spring are so stirring in the air, new joys of living are eager to break through into the light: “Now everything, everything must change!”

We do not wish to censure this Easter feeling. One may well rejoice also over spring and the return of the rising sap, which will enlarge the buds and soon bring forth blossoms. We should also be grateful that the new bread begins to grow which—may God will it—despite all the distress around us will still support the life of millions of human beings. One thing only should we avoid, if we wish to celebrate Easter right and become glad for the true Easter message and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must not be misled by the might of such strains of nature so that we regard the Biblical account of the resurrection of the Lord as a mere allegory for that victory of life over death which we see—or rather think we see—yearly in the spring. This is only a mental short circuit. We know perfectly well that the life that blooms out there must come to grief in death. All we do is to push this thought back from us again and again, and thus we defend ourselves against a pessimism which is justified per se but after all is of no use whatsoever.

No, to celebrate Easter right we must listen to the message which God has sent us in His word. This message knows nothing of a universal natural law, according to which life is stronger than death, good is mightier than evil, or other such idealistic dogmas, whatever they may be—in which at any rate no one really believes any more.

When the Easter morning dawned a solitary woman was sitting at the grave of Jesus of Nazareth. She had been there once before, in the darkness of the last night hours, and noticed with horrified astonishment that the grave was opened and the covering stone rolled away. She then hurried back and fetched two of the disciples of Jesus, Peter and John. They immediately ran there but found nothing except an empty tomb. Mary Magdalene came back, following them, and remained there when the others left. She weeps: the empty tomb only increases her sorrow. They have taken away her Lord, and she does not know where the body has been placed. Jesus had been her particular benefactor, he had delivered her soul from the deepest distress: the Evangelist Luke relates that seven demons were driven out of her. No wonder his

death struck her like the blow of a club! No wonder the disappearance of the body makes her even more painfully conscious of her utter loneliness! This woman is aware of the truth of the Lord's saying, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). She knows that a life without the Lord Christ is unbearable for her, in her feebleness and in her distress. And so she stares into the grave and finds there nothing but dark hopelessness in spite of the shining fingers of the angels, mentioned by the Evangelist, who vainly attempt to concern themselves with her sorrow.

This woman is the very first who experienced the comfort and the joy of the Easter message. To help her is the first task of the Risen One.

This is in fact the only common feature in all the numerous accounts, widely differing in details, of the apparitions of the Risen One: that people who already had a close relationship to the Lord Christ are always involved, that the Easter assurance comes to them while they are in a state of mourning, or fear, or even dismay. The resurrection of the Lord is not a general good news which everyone may appropriate. Whoever thinks he can manage by himself his living and dying; whoever is satisfied with himself and the world, or has settled matters with a compromise, so that nothing can disturb his balance any more—such a one simply lacks the organ of reception, he lacks eyes which are able to see the risen Lord, he lacks ears to hear his voice.

But there is a hope for him who is perplexed because the woe of mankind and his own are burning in his soul; for him who is crushed to the ground by the loneliness, far from God, of this world and of his own being—like this weeping woman or like the disciples in the awareness of their pitiful cowardice and their contemptible ingratitude toward the man to whom they owe their best, their all—yes, for such people there is hope! For them it may mean something when they are told in the Easter tidings of the resurrection of the Crucified: this Gospel message is for those who labor and are heavy laden—and only for them!

And so it may well be that it was not and is not in vain that God gives us, in our situation, a strong impression that the world is immersed in wickedness, as the Apostle writes; that without His help there remains no possibility for us to dominate our life, be it even at the price of a complete inner hardening—and that would mean only that not we dominated life, but that life dominated us. I repeat, it may be that we do not receive these impressions in vain. To the one who has lost the assurance that everything will turn out all right, who mourns in his heart because among us human beings evil triumphs and goodness is crucified, who is on the brink of despair because he can discover nowhere a ray of light which might presage a new and better dawn for us and for the whole of mankind—to such a one the risen Lord is perhaps closer than he himself would suppose, even if he does not see him yet and does not yet recognize his voice.

In any case this is true of the weeping woman of the Gospel. She knows nothing but grief and anguish, she sees nothing but a dark empty tomb, and she has no answer to the question of what is now to become of her without her Lord and Master. And that is why Jesus himself stands behind her without her noticing it. But when she looks around in her searching helplessness and discerns him, she does not recognize him but takes him to be the gardener. Nay, even after he speaks to her and asks about her grief, no light goes on for her but merely a tiny spark of hope that this man may at last tell her what has happened to her beloved departed: "Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away."

The peculiar and singular dusk in which this meeting takes place we find also in almost all accounts of Easter appearances. The closest friends and acquaintances have not recognized the Risen One at once, remaining in the dark about whom they had before themselves, until Christ himself told them or gave them to understand who he was. The Emmaus disciples walked and talked with him probably an hour or more, and neither his figure nor his voice betrayed to them who their companion was. And Thomas could not believe that he had the risen Jesus before his eyes until he placed his fingers in the nail marks and his hand in the riven side.

There is also a mystery about his coming and going. He suddenly appears and disappears, and it would even seem that he was seen at various places at the same time.

Under these circumstances it is understandable that it is simply impossible to arrange the various accounts of the Resurrection and of the appearances given by the apostles and the Evangelists into a unit free of contradictions, something that is not at all difficult, for instance, in the case of the history of the Passion. The resurrection of Jesus, in contradistinction to his passion and death, is not what we designate as a “historical event.” No unbelieving eye has seen the Risen One, no critical observer has discerned him, and so it is simply excluded that proof be given that the resurrection of the Lord is a fact. It can only be certified through testimony, and thus we may admit it by faith or deny it by unbelief, exactly as the “for you for the remission of sins” by which the Lord has interpreted his death. Thereby God honors our freedom as personal beings: he does not force us and obliges no one to believe and obey, but he leaves us free to decide. If the Resurrection were demonstrable, we should be under the compulsion to acknowledge it willy-nilly, for after a demonstration there is never a “No.” We, however, must make our own decision; and to this decision, which remains our quite personal and quite private affair, we are summoned by the self-testimony of Jesus and by the testimony of his disciples and apostles. This is now our dilemma: to believe or not to believe.

This is how we must understand the fact that the risen Lord did not make himself known directly but only goes far enough in his self-testimony to let us arrive at a decision by faith.

For the weeping and mourning Mary a single word, addressed to her by Jesus, suffices. He calls her by name: “Mary.” Then the woman turns about, for she perceives in this single word everything she needs to hear. “Yes, it is I,” says this voice. “I know you and have not abandoned you. True, I was dead, but death could not separate me from you and you from me. I am here as the living one and I do not leave you in the lurch. My hand will still hold you and guide you, so that all the demons cannot get at you. For you are and remain mine. Do you believe this for my sake? Do you believe in me?”

And Mary answers, likewise with a single word, “Rabboni”—“my Master.” And in that one word lies her whole confession of faith. “Yes, certainly, I believe you, I believe your promise. You have overcome death and are the Living One forever. You are close to me and you will lead me, and no one can tear me away from your hand. I was foolish when I mourned and wept and sought the Living One among the dead. I was blind and deaf, but now I know and believe that my Saviour lives, that you live!” So Mary, before anyone else, arrives at the faith in the Risen One.

The circumstances under which we are called to a faith decision are varied and manifold, like human life in general. God leads everyone of us, each by his particular way, to make our heart sensitive to His call: the one into the quiet of illness, the other into the solitude of imprisonment; the one to a grave, the other to the smoking ruins of his earthly property. But always the Lord Christ stands behind us when we look around for help and comfort, and he calls us by our name as he did Mary and reminds us that he is not a stranger: “Have you forgotten me—

and yet you have been baptized in my name? I am the one who offered up his life on the cross, and lo! I am the Living One, the same yesterday, today, and through all eternity. I speak to you now and here, and I wish to lead you on the right way. Now is the decision before you. Will you let yourself be led, chastised, instructed, warned, allured, and comforted by me? Or do you wish to be your own Lord and God? This, however, you should know: for you I gave up my life and for you I am here as the living one.”

We may freely decline to follow this call, we are not forced. We may answer, “You are only a myth, and in reality dead for two thousand years. I prefer to go my own way.” Then, however, we must see how far and to what place we go. It is our own, wholly personal, decision, which no one can take from us, whether we truly can and may speak thus or whether we must not rather confess, “Yes, Lord, I know it; your word is true, and the way in which you lead me is the right one. Forgive me for having sought and trodden my own ways, and take my life again into your hands, Rabboni, my Master, my Lord, and my God.” If this pours forth out of our hearts, if we must speak thus, then we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who not only was crucified for us, but was also raised for us. But if we decide otherwise and turn from him to ourselves, then it is altogether unimportant whether we believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, or whether we believe that his body was somehow removed. In that case, these are only matters of opinion, which do not lead to any personal decision in regard to ourselves and our lives.

The risen Lord meets us in his word and in his sacrament: there he appears before us and lets us hear his voice, there he makes himself known as the Living One—and yet he remains at the same time veiled so that we do not see him and recognize him directly, but can only find him in our faith. It is therefore easily understood that, at times—and occasionally in hours of great distress and trial—we should desire something more firm and more certain. We should like to see his countenance, how it is, and feel the hand that guides us, in our own hand.

Something of the sort Mary Magdalene seems also to feel when she recognizes in the supposed gardener her Lord and Master: she wishes to rush upon him, to embrace his knees, she wishes to persuade herself that no doubt is now possible, that it really is Jesus and that she does not behold an illusion of her pining heart. But she does not even have the chance of taking a step forward. The Lord forbids it to her: “Touch me not.” A singular saying, when we remember that the same Lord, according to the same Evangelist, fulfilled a similar wish of his disciple Thomas, indeed he actually urged him: “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side” (John 20:27). Similar is what we read in Luke concerning the first appearance of Jesus before the assembled disciples: in their terror they think they are seeing a ghost, so he says to them: “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39).

The Lord Christ deals with people individually when he places a person before the faith problem. He does not ascribe to anyone more than he is able to accomplish; but he does not give anyone more than is good and healthy for him. For Mary the single word suffices; from now on the might of her love will retain the memory of this single meeting and thereby also the faith. Thomas, the honest doubter, faces a harder road and receives therefore greater help, and likewise the frightened company of the disciples who, in terror of the Jews, dare only to gather behind closed doors. But at last all of them are completely restored to faith, none of them retains palpable and obvious evidence of the resurrection of the Lord. The appearances cease, the Lord Christ returns home to his heavenly Father, and only for the time of his return in power and glory are his believers promised the complete union with him, when believing

becomes seeing, hope is changed into fulfillment, and love remains unaltered through all eternity.

This “Touch me not,” which Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene, is also valid for us. We do not receive a palpable assurance that our Saviour lives, and we cannot reckon with bodily appearances of the Risen One. We are made to rely exclusively on faith, and we find our Lord only in the veiled revelation of his word and his sacrament. The Lord gives us no more than is good for us. But we must also be certain that he does not ascribe to us more than we can bear.

So there ever remains in our faith a longing and a hope which direct us forward and upward. But our longing is without fear and our hope without doubt. The Risen One salutes us, the believers, as his brothers; and he allows us to proclaim his heavenly Father, to whom he returns, as our Father. And this is the fruit of his dying and of his resurrection: a way is opened before us, a way out from this terrestrial world of sin and death, a way into the eternal divine world of peace and life. “Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (John 20:17).

With this commission Mary Magdalene returns home to the disciples. She does not try to postpone the moment of leave-taking. She knows that the Lord is close to her whenever she has need of him, even if her eyes cannot see him. Her tears have been dried, her mourning has been changed into a lasting joy, and so she becomes the first announcer of the resurrection: “Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her” (John 20:18).

Yes, the Easter message is not a Gospel for everybody. First of all, and fundamentally, it is an entirely personal question to everyone in our midst: “Do you seek the man who on Good Friday expired on the cross? Do you need him in order to find peace for your troubled heart? Then be comforted: he is not lying in the tomb, his tomb is empty. He, however, lives, and is near unto you. He would be your Lord and Master, your Saviour and King, if you believe in him. He is risen!”

But this message does not remain hidden; it is passed on, and wherever its proclamation finds faith, open ears, and receptive hearts, there the church of this living Lord arises and carries farther the joyful shout, “The Lord is risen!” And this church knows that the Lord Christ, whose rule is now heavenly and hidden from the earth, will truly come in order to renew everything: “Behold, I make all things new.” The spring outside and everything that is still beautiful and alive in this world of death becomes for us, who know the Risen One, an allegory indicating that our Lord is alive and that because of him we have a glad and living hope.

Thou wilt complete Thy glorious work,
Who art Saviour and Judge of the worlds;
Thou wilt turn the anguish of mankind,
Though dark be Thy way now, O Holy One.
Hence Faith ceases not Thee to beseech,
For Thy deeds surpass our entreaty and understanding!
Amen.

The sermon was preached on Easter Monday, April 2nd, 1945, while Martin Niemoller was imprisoned in Dachau Concentration Camp.

Source: Martin Niemoller, *Dachau Sermons*, translated by Robert H. Pfeiffer, New York-London: Harper & Brothers, 1946, pp. -97.