

# “Doing The One Thing That Matters”

John 20:19-34 ~ 4/302000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

## Introduction to the Scripture Reading:

As an introduction to the reading, I'll say that by this time Sunday night, the disciples had heard Peter and John's account of the empty tomb and Mary tell of seeing Jesus alive. Earlier, Jesus had appeared to the two on the road to Emmaus but the people in that room may not yet have heard the news. All of them were still in shock from seeing Jesus tortured to death. They were afraid for their lives because of what the authorities might do to them.

In today's text there are two resurrection appearances of Jesus. The first is to the ten disciples (Judas and Thomas being absent). A second visit was a week later when Thomas was present.

You can see in the parallel gospels printing that John's account differs slightly from Luke's briefer version, which was written at least ten years earlier than John's.

## John 20:19-31 is Read

How many of you would like to have back every dollar you've ever spent on insurance policies that you've never had to use? Probably would add up through the years, wouldn't it? And wouldn't it have been nice if someone would have made us, as teens, start putting money aside and never touch it unless we had a car accident or health care need? Guess we'd all like to know what we know now - back when we were young. Wouldn't that have saved us from a lot of trouble? "Hindsight is always 20 / 20."

So we learn but life turns out to be pretty good anyway. Life is so good, in fact, that we spend a lot of our energies trying to preserve life as it is now. We've got to admit it; we're living in Camelot. We go for walks in the neighborhood and we're not getting mugged. We've got health insurance in case we need a costly operation. And as aggravating as managed health care has become, we've still got better medical care than any country in the world. We have our homes, cars and possessions insured enough to be replaced.

Get this! I ran my car into our snow blower in the garage a few years ago. The employee at the small engine repair place said 'check with your insurance company.' "Yea, right" I said. "Like they're going to

pay me for running over my own snow blower." But I did call them, carefully noting that it was my own stupidity and driving ineptitude that caused me to drive my car into the machine.

The insurance policy replaced it, minus the deductible. They probably figured that we pay enough through our auto and home policy that we'll pay for it, anyway, in the end. Only in America.

But how much of our lives is spent working to make sure we can keep everything in place in our lifestyle? By in large, most of us are fairly well off compared to most people in this country and elsewhere the world. You have probably heard accounts of how immigrants from European countries actually weep the first time they see the abundance of any one of our typical supermarkets. We have a lot for which to be grateful and I know you are.

Our lives have also become fairly predictable. We have settled into a lifestyle where we can pretty much predict what we'll be doing from day to day. I'll bet you can picture, almost exactly, what you'll be doing next Saturday as you begin to muddle through the chores in the weekend job jar.

Around our house, we even have a sense of the patterns of appliance failure. "Which major appliance will go this month" we asked ourselves as we drank our coffee this morning. The oven? The VCR? The car? The coffeemaker? The dishwasher? This morning the answer was the dryer.

And don't you hate it when you meet people who smugly state that they've always washed their dishes by hand and they simply don't need a dishwasher? They're really from another planet, I think and it will be covered on a future "X-Files" episode. Because we've become so used to the convenience of doing something else while the dishes are being washed, that around our house, it is a national emergency if the darn thing breaks.

Schedules must be adjusted. Paper plates and cups must be bought along with plasticware. Tensions flare. The entire universe is out of sync if we become the least bit inconvenienced in our schedules.

Think back to your college psychology studies. Remember Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of

needs -- Maslow's ladder? His theory, you recall, was that there is a ladder (or hierarchy) of human needs. The basic requirements of food, clothing and shelter are among the bottom rungs of the ladder. These basics must be met before we can start working on the higher needs. The higher needs have to do with the meaning of life, personal fulfillment, life after death, significant human and spiritual relationships and functioning dishwashers. In other words, we can't sit around and discuss ethics, metaphysics and global politics if we've just been laid off from our jobs and we're about to lose our homes or declare bankruptcy.

A majority of us, by now, have most of our basic needs taken care of, here in Camelot. This is the reason we have energy to discuss certain social and personal issues. We have the luxury of discussing Theology, of all things. We can pursue spiritual quests, . . . although a sense of God's presence can come upon us even when we're not pursuing it.

Well our comfortable and predictable lifestyles have not gone unnoticed by our children. I'm wondering if our kids aren't looking at us in ways similar to how we viewed our parents' generation. Because what did some of us see in our youth in the 50s and 60s?

We saw our parents embrace an unshakable loyalty and trust in their external institutions - the company, the church and the nation's political establishment. They didn't change careers or readily question authority. We saw our parents' generation before us stay with the roles that society prescribed and changing those roles wasn't taken lightly.

Today I think our children are seeing similar things in us. I'm wondering if we have gotten ourselves into a tightly prescribed commitment to "doing what we've got to do -- just to keep our ship sailing along -- braced for any uncertainties." In the eyes of my family I think I can see disappointment that I've always been such a workaholic. That my values have somehow gotten fowled up and I'm barely much more than this productive company person who will go to almost any length to be more productive.

Young adults don't want to live that way and maybe we don't want to either. But we want to maintain what we've got. You can feel it.

We've got to keep on keeping on. "Maintenance is the key to survival" says an inner voice. And we keep telling this to ourselves until the machine starts

to break down. The blood pressure. Cardiovascular problems. Health scares. Significant emotional and spiritual experiences.

But one of the wonderful things that happens in our forties and fifties is that we suddenly and abruptly, for one reason or another, wake up and realize what's really important. We talk about those things here. So where does that leave our kids?

They're in pretty good shape, actually. I dare say, they're smarter than I was. They have access to more knowledge and information than we did even in college and beyond. At this point, I'm convinced that if I turned my life over to my daughter to manage for a couple of weeks, I'm sure I'd see improvement in some areas.

But my daughter's generation doesn't feel like they know what is ahead. They're surrounded by a bunch of baby-boomers who, despite our protest marches and crusades to transform society into a more creative and egalitarian environment, we haven't turned out to be a whole lot different than previous generations. History repeats itself.

I still have a basic optimism in the next generation, though. There's kindness and hope. And as Alanis Morissette sings for our kids, she sings for us because we know "we haven't got it all figured out just yet." But we're spending a lot of our time and energies trying to keep life from changing very much from what it is now. So even though the bills are just barely paid and the major appliance failure of the month hasn't occurred yet, we still hunger for something else.

We hunger for spiritual things. We want something supernatural, beyond the mediocrity of the middle class, to dazzle us with its stunning reality. So trying not to be noticed, we listen to others at work who talk about astrology or angels or some New Age attempts to get in touch with mystical things. We want something transcendent, something that is more real than the brittle theological categories of Swiss Calvinism. We want God to be real but we don't want to be dragged off to BryLynn and be thought of as a raving and irrational religious freak who is socially inappropriate in the work place.

Did you ever take a young child to a shopping mall to meet Mini or Mickey mouse? Remember how they were all excited on the way but when they actually saw this six-foot-high paper-maché Mickey and Miney Mouse moving and talking, they were terrified. It's one thing to see these Disney characters

on the television but live, . . . that's another thing.

It's the same way for us. In the same way, in our lives, it's one thing to read about Jesus being God but if we were confronted with the stark reality and presence of God, we'd be terrified. We want to touch, as did Thomas, . . . we want to touch God or have God touch us. But we don't dare, because . . . we've got the house to clean and shopping to get done before the crowd arrives for dinner.

We want to find a balance. We want to be considered "normal" people but we don't want a normal God Who is concealed and hermetically sealed away in the rituals and liturgy of organized religion. We want to go beyond our jobs and our household responsibilities and reach out and extend ourselves to others. We want to be used by God. We want to sense the reality of the actual presence of God but it isn't penciled in anywhere in our DayRunner® calendars.

We already know that we can go to any religious gathering and ultimately hear whatever we want to hear. And yet we know that we can't grow unless we let go of something in order to pick up (and embrace) something else. But what to pick up? What to let go?

We know that most everyone, in some way, is kind of broken but it is the job of those of us who are less broken to help mend those who are more broken.<sup>1</sup> But we would like the conversation in the break room at work to suddenly stop (about the movie stars and the millionaires) for a minute to hear something else. We'd like someone to just pause and say "You know, God is right here next to us and the rest of this stuff really doesn't matter." Or something like that.

But nobody says that and the conversations continue about the car repairs, the affairs of the movie stars, liposuction, the latest suicide cult and the latest sale at Lands End. We want God to be real now and tomorrow at 11:15 when we've got to get that report together, without the promised resources we needed, or you-know-who will have another conniption fit. "What does God have to do with what's going on in my life and in our household?" we ask. We are consumed with the ordinary but at the same time, we want God to break through it all.

Let's put a little flesh on these people.

*(Dialing, Speaking to the cell Phone)*

<sup>1</sup> To borrow a line from the character in the film "Angie."

"Say Tom, you've got to get over here. Jesus is back from the dead. Drop everything, . . . ya' gotta' see Him."

*(Speaking to the side)*

"Say Jesus, what do You say we order a pizza? Party size, right? Maybe 60 medium wings?"

*(Speaking into the cell phone again)*

"You've got to do what? Well can't you come over during half time? Jesus . . . is here, man. Remember, . . . He died. Well, he's alive again. I'm not making this up."

*(pause)*

"Next week?"

*(To the side)*

"Say Jesus, can You come back again next week? Tom's kind of jammed. He's got a house full of guests."

Speaking back to the phone

"OK, he can. We'll see ya then."

*(Hang-up)*

You can best believe that they weren't this casual. Like Thomas, in the second appearance, they were thunderstruck by the presence of the supernatural. Obviously there are a lot of things that puzzle us about these two post-death appearances of Jesus. Why wasn't Thomas with them for the first appearance? Why didn't someone run out, run down the street and get him. Why didn't they all just go over to Tom's house together? Didn't Thomas get the memo?

And if God can do anything, why didn't God make special arrangements so that they would all be there together? You know, work out a few circumstances so that they'd all come together to experience the same thing. And what's this about forgiving and not forgiving sins?<sup>2</sup> But then again, the awkwardness of the second appearance is almost evidence that it really happened. Whenever the supernatural confronts the ordinary every-day, it is bound to be awkward. Remember resurrection morning. Four different gospel accounts and the order of events varies from one to another. They didn't believe the Mary's (to whom Jesus first appeared). Jesus had to come and tell them Himself.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There is also a disputed passage about the disciples given power to forgive or not forgive sin that takes more time to deal with than is available for this sermon.

<sup>3</sup> And when Thomas finally got together with the others, Jesus came back, almost to accommodate him. And Tom was

If you were reading a Cliff's Notes of this sermon so far, what would you have? Point one: we're all struggling along – trying to preserve as much of our lifestyles as we can, sometimes too distracted with the demands of our every-day lives to get involved with a whole lot outside of ourselves. Yet we want to grow and contribute to others. We're not shallow. We're good people.

Point two: Jesus died and came back from the dead in reality, in history and in space and time. So what are we supposed to do with that? That's what our gatherings here are about, aren't they? We're seeking the reality of God.

So this is what it comes to: How real is God to you, right now in this moment? At some point in our lives, each of us have had what some call "holy moments." These are the times when all of our experiences, our intellectual reckoning and our gut sense of things have convinced us of the reality of the presence of God in our lives. We try to talk about these moments in a small circle of trusted friends.

You know God is real and that God is a loving caring and powerful God Who has touched and changed our lives in ways you can't even explain. From time to time, we find new and surprising things about the meaning of our lives and God's involvement in it. We don't talk a lot about our spiritual experiences for a number of reasons. God is holy and we don't want to cheapen it to make it sound easy or trendy. There are things that happen that are obviously more than coincidental but we don't want to talk as if we know everything that God does, (as if we're carrying God around in our back pocket like some huckster TV evangelist).

In contrast, our religion is personal and holy. We feel as if God is holding our lives in hand but here's a suggestion to consider as we leave today to go off for another week.

For the time we've got left on this earth, however long that is, what is the one thing in which you

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considered the biggest skeptic of them all but this wasn't fair. It was Thomas was already a disciple, even one of the original twelve closest to Jesus. Elsewhere the gospels refer to Thomas as "courageously devoted to Jesus (John 11:16) and theologically alert (John 14:5). There was a gospel version that was attributed to his name but it didn't make it in the Bible canon. There was even a tradition that Thomas made a missionary trip to India but still he was tagged with the title "Doubting Thomas." Because Thomas was skeptical, does that make him any worse than us?

personally can make a difference? What is it that you can resurrect to new life?

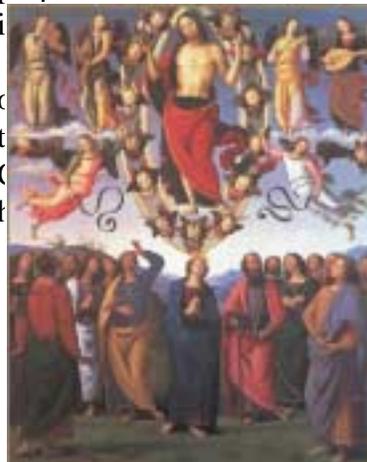
You needn't look too far. Think about the closest person to you. Forget your career (in or outside of the house), . . . the stocks, bonds and property. Forget this church and your much-appreciated voluntarism for a minute. What could you do to make life *wonderful* for the person you love the most?

Do you think she or he really wants to do the ugliest part of the house cleaning each week? Do you think that he or she really enjoys struggling through the bill paying process? Does the one you love really like being alone as much as they have to be (when you're off pursuing something interesting to you)? How much of a companion have you been?

And I know this will be hard to consider but when your loved one dies, just before they go over to be in the very obvious presence of God, are they going to say: "*What a life I've lived. It was so wonderful living with you. I feel that I've been living in the presence of something holy. You have brought such intense joy to my life. I'm going on ahead of us but from living with you, I think I already know something of what it will be like. I love you.*"

You already know what to do. Make life special for those closest to you. This is the one thing in life you can do that is truly noble and beautiful and brilliant – the one thing.

You've got the very Spirit of God within you to do it. Nothing else matters. Give your life for this purpose because what if we discover, in hindsight, that i



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