

“The Cost of Easter”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
Easter Day – April 4, 2010
John 20:1-18

“Easter costs less at Wal-Mart.” This is a line from a commercial that has been plaguing me for weeks. I’ve heard it on the radio and seen it on television. “Easter costs less at Wal-Mart.” The radio ad goes on to describe how shopping at Wal-Mart is so much more desirable than shopping at drug stores. You can get so much more stuff for the Easter baskets at Wal-Mart because it costs less. If you shop at Wal-Mart, then your baskets will have the most stuff.

The first time I heard this commercial, I laughed out loud. In disbelief. Easter costs less at Wal-Mart? I bet it does.

Now before I illuminate the problems I have with Wal-Mart’s marketing campaign, let me just say that I realize Wal-Mart is speaking of secular Easter, the spring holiday with the bunny and the chocolate and jelly beans, the baby chicks and pretty flowers and peeps, the feel-good, celebrate good weather, eat-lots-of-junk-cause-it-tastes-good holiday. Secular Easter is yummy! Y’all know how much I love chocolate. And in a way Wal-Mart is offering the good news of secular Easter. In the current economy, families who may be having trouble paying bills or making ends meet, but who still want to provide a moment of joy for their children on Easter morning, will find Wal-Mart’s message to be one of good news. Save money. Live better. Easter costs less at Wal-Mart. Alleluia.

Of course the problem I have with Wal-Mart's proclamation is that it has nothing to do with real Easter. The secular spring holiday is about filling baskets. Easter is about an empty tomb. Wal-Mart's secular holiday is about cutting costs. Easter doesn't come without a cost. And that's what appalled me most when I first heard the ad. "Easter costs less..." No. Easter costs everything.

We can't get to Easter, to resurrection, to the singing and Alleluias and joy without first passing through Good Friday with the torture of death by crucifixion. Jesus could not be raised from the dead until he had died. The disciples couldn't know the joy of being reunited with their risen friend and teacher until they had known the grief of losing him.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Mary? In John's gospel we don't hear mention of Mary Magdalene until she is named as one of the three Marys who stand at the foot of the cross and witness the crucifixion, but we can surmise that she was one of Jesus' disciples. We can imagine that she had followed him and listened to his teaching, that she had been inspired by who he was and the things that he said, that she loved him as her friend and teacher. Then she had to watch while he died a horribly cruel death, this man who had never done anything wrong, who had taught about love and forgiveness, who had healed the sick and raised the dead, who had lived his life as a servant to others. What kind of helplessness and grief must she have felt as she gazed up at the broken and bleeding body of Jesus? It must have felt like hope had died.

When Mary crept in the dark of the predawn morning to the tomb where Jesus had been laid, I wonder what she was expecting. Certainly not for the stone to have been rolled away. Certainly not for Jesus' body to be gone. No wonder she couldn't stop weeping. It hadn't been enough that they had crucified him; now she didn't even know where his body was resting. It didn't matter that Jesus had told the disciples what would happen to him. When Mary saw that empty tomb, her grief overcame her. Not even the appearance of angels could comfort her.

Only Jesus himself, her risen Lord, calling her name, "Mary," could stop her tears. Only Jesus could bring her to see what the empty tomb really meant – not that his dead body had been stolen but that no tomb could hold the risen Christ. Mary must have immediately tried to embrace Jesus in her joy, but he resisted, "Do not hold on to me."¹

It's such a human response, though, isn't it? To try to hold on. But Jesus could not be held. Not by Mary. Not by the tomb. Not by death. No matter how much we may want to hold onto him, we can't. As Presbyterian pastor Craig Barnes writes, "Following Jesus is a never-ending process of losing him the moment we have him captured, only to discover him anew in an even more unmanageable form. Every expectation of Jesus is only another futile effort to get him back in the tomb. But Jesus just won't stay there."

And neither can we. Once we have encountered the risen Christ, things must change.

¹ Craig Barnes, "Savior at Large," <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2248>.

Just as they did for Mary and the disciples. The time of weeping was over. Jesus immediately sent Mary back to proclaim to the other disciples that she had seen him and that he would be ascending. Their work was only beginning. It was time to move forward to the next thing. Jesus would ascend to God and the disciples would carry on his work, proclaiming the good news of resurrection to the ends of the earth. They gave their all to share that message.

We have the same work to do. We have been sent with the same message. Our Easter message is the good news of Christ crucified, buried, and risen. Our Easter message is the good news that we have been redeemed, that death no longer has dominion over us. Our Easter message is the good news that God forgives us and loves us.

The world today needs to hear that message every bit as much as first century Palestine. We don't need baskets full of empty calories; we need the empty tomb, filled with the light of resurrection. We don't need to fill our emptiness with more stuff; we need to fill our emptiness with a relationship with God and with other people. We don't need an Easter that costs less; we need an Easter that is simultaneously free of charge and of the greatest cost. It's free of charge because Jesus took the cost on himself. But if we become his followers it will cost us everything we have. You see, at Wal-Mart, we may give less money and get more candy, but with Jesus, when we give our lives for him, we gain eternal life. I don't know about you, but I'll take eternal life over a cheaper Cadbury egg any day!