**Lingering in the Garden**

**FBC Albemarle**

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If you have traveled to less-developed countries, you understand that perception of time is very different than what we experience in our culture. When I was in Kenya, everybody moved in African time. When I was in Roatan, Honduras, everyone operated on island time. There is a different rhythm to life in other cultures compared to ours.

Most of us feel completely frazzled and out of synch with our deepest selves. We live hurried lives moving from one thing to the next, sometimes even trying to multi-task to become more efficient. Psychotherapists have long seen an increase in cases of depression and anxiety due to people’s efforts to keep up the pace.

Matter of fact, time poverty is now a recognized psychological and social stressor. In a highly complex society, there just isn’t enough time for everything: our demanding jobs, our hectic family schedules, our commute to and from work, and trying to keep up with the 24/7 nature of social media and world news. Though we try to keep up with life, we seem to fall further behind.

It seems early that Sunday morning about two thousand years ago, the day started off slow but it would soon be hurried. The scripture says that “while it was still dark,” Mary Magdalene along with other women went to the tomb. Perhaps they went to put more spices on the body of Jesus, even though his body was already prepared and put into the tomb. Perhaps, they simply went to be there and weep some more because there was nowhere else to be, nothing else to do, nothing else that mattered.

Mary Magdalene doesn’t feature in John’s gospel until her appearance, with the other Marys, at the foot of the cross. John has told us nothing of her history; the little we know, we know from other gospels. But her place in John’s account is spectacular. She is the first to bring the news that the tomb was empty. Even greater than that, she was the first to meet and speak with the risen Savior.

Mary saw that the stone in front of the tomb had been rolled away from the entrance. The quiet, slow morning has now turned into a day of fast-paced chaos. She turns from walking to running. As she ran back to report her findings to the disciples, I am sure her mind was racing with all of the possibilities of what might have happened to her Rabbi’s body. Someone has taken him as a cruel act: some gardener, some worker, some soldier or someone’s servant. When she reaches the disciples, she blurts out “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” They…it had to be someone else…Jesus was dead.

Now Peter and John are running. John, who is a bit younger, gets to the tomb first but does not go in. He sees something curious: there are the linen cloths that Jesus had been wrapped in lying there. Someone has not only taken the body away; they have first gone to the trouble of unwrapping him.

Peter, huffing and puffing, finally arrives at the tomb but true to his character, he simply runs in to see for himself. No waiting; no beating around the bush; no debating should-we-should-we-not. Then Peter sees something even more curious: the linen cloths are lying there; but the single cloth, the napkin that had been around Jesus’ head, isn’t with the others. It’s in a place by itself. Someone, having unwrapped the body has gone to the trouble of laying out the cloths to create an effect, as if he was Houdini and just slipped out of the wrapping and had the ability to fold the single cloth, as if he was alive…could it be?

Then comes the moment. The beloved disciple, John, entered the tomb after Peter. When he saw the wrapping on the ground and the linen cloth folded, scripture says “he saw and believed.” John had believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He had believed that God had sent him, that he was God’s man for God’s people and the world, but this was different. He may not have understood it all but John understood that Jesus was alive.

It was at that time Peter and John made the mistake of still being in a hurry. I am sure they wanted to go back and report to the other disciples of what they had witnessed with their own eyes. Yet, Mary lingered there in the garden. She stayed, crying; wondering; unsure what was happening. When she looked into the tomb, she saw two angels. One asked, “Woman, why are you crying?” When she started to explain what had happened, she sensed someone was behind her. She turned to find a man standing there, but she did not recognize Jesus. Thinking that he was the gardener, she asked if he was the one who had taken the body and placed it elsewhere.

Then Jesus answered her by name. “Mary.” As soon as Jesus called her by name, she recognized that familiar voice; a voice that had called her by name many times before. On a side note, I wonder if we would recognize the voice of Jesus when he calls us by name?

Because Mary lingered in the garden, she was the first to encounter the resurrected Jesus. She was the first to see him. She was the first to speak to him. She was probably the first to touch him. (even though Jesus instructed her to not hold on to him) Peter and John, in their haste, missed out on being the first. So what do we need to learn from Peter, John and Mary? Especially in today’s culture, we need to learn to slow down and linger in places. Maybe we would also not miss out on an encounter with the risen Lord! We need to learn to linger a little longer.

First, we need to learn to linger with God. It is easy to fall into the trap of hurriedness with God. “God, if you could answer today’s prayer yesterday, that would be great.” “God, if you can show me what I am suppose to do in the next year, that would save me a lot of time.” “God, if you could just tell me what my vocation should be on a large billboard, that would save me a lot of stress and anxiety.” This is the type of attitude we take with our relationship with God. “God, if you could do this…do that…I could serve you better.” Yet, no where in scripture do I read of Jesus showing the disciples how to do something more efficiently. Hurriedness and efficiency wasn’t part of Jesus’ vocabulary.

We have a hard time lingering with God because we are impatient and we don’t like silence. Henri Nouwen, in his book *With Open Hands*, wrote, “For many of us, silence has become a threat. There was a time when silence was normal and a lot of noise disturbed us. But today, noise is the normal fare, and silence- as strange as it may seem – has become a disturbance. It is not hard to understand why people who experience silence in this way have difficulty with prayer.”

In order to linger with God, we need to learn to be comfortable with silence. We need to give God the time and space to move in our lives. We need to give God the opportunity to answer our prayers and to show us his love and care. When we treat God as the cosmic Santa Claus, we will never learn to be in an intimate relationship with the One who loves us most.

Second, we need to learn to linger in our relationships with one another. Many of us, me being the chief offender, have our lives on a strict schedule. We feel guilty when we are not “accomplishing” something tangible. We have a difficult time relaxing in a conversation or simply “wasting” time with people we love. We have bought into the lie that our worth or value is tied to what we produce and accomplish.

At the end of our lives, very few of our accomplishments will be remembered. What we produced for our company or for ourselves will matter very little. However, what will matter is how we loved our family and friends. What will be remembered are the times that we spent on the beach with our family, the time that you spent sharing stories with one another, the time that was “wasted” on the bank of a pond fishing or the time “wasted” on a golf course with your friends. What matters at the end is how we lingered with one another and how we loved each other.

There is a great quote that says, ‘Time has a wonderful way of showing us what really matters.” It’s true isn’t it? Time is a commodity that runs in short supply. Therefore, we need to learn to linger a little longer with our family and friends before it we no longer have the time to linger.

Today, let us learn from Mary Magdalene and linger a little longer wherever we are and whoever we are with. Let us linger a little longer with our family and friends, knowing that time “wasted” with them is time well spent. Let us also linger in the presence of our risen Savior whom we celebrate today. Our Lord, who suffered and died in place of our sins did not remain in the grave. He arose and Jesus lives today! Don’t miss what Easter is about! So let us linger with our Lord on this Easter Sunday a little longer than usual. Maybe, as we linger, we will encounter the Lord face-to-face.