

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Third Sunday in Lent

19 March 2005

Servant Girl

1 John 4:16b-19

Mark 14:66-72

Why does it all have to be about Peter? Isn't it always all about Peter? There are other characters in the story, you know. But have we ever thought about them? Have you ever heard this story and wondered what was going on for that servant girl? Or in that courtyard? What was she asking? What was she looking for? Why was she so insistent on getting him to talk to her and admit that he knew this Jesus of Nazareth?

I suspect that the city was a buzz. It was almost the Passover, and people had been busy getting ready. And as they do every year, folks had been streaming into Jerusalem. Sure, they could observe the Passover wherever they wanted, but there was something special about doing it here, in the holy city. And so while the servants and salespeople of Jerusalem had their own family preparations to make, they also had to wait on all the guests, make sure they were comfortable and had what they needed. That was the predictable pressure and excitement of Passover, but this year there was more going on. Word had been spreading about this Jesus of Nazareth guy. People talked about having been healed, or children that had been brought back from the brink of death. They said he was an unbelievable story-teller, who could hold an audience in the palm of his hand and just when they thought they knew where he was going and what his point was going to be, he'd take them somewhere else and leave their heads spinning with his understanding of the kingdom of God. And he taught such different things than the rabbis in the temple. Well, he started in the same place as they did, but he understood those laws differently. And the servants and salespeople felt so embraced by what they heard. They felt cared for by what they heard, maybe even respected, honored, included. All anybody had ever cared about them before was what they could do for them, how well they could clean a bathroom or how heavy a load they could carry, or how fast they could plant a field, how fat their pigeons were. But suddenly, here was someone who was willing to touch them, and listen to them and feed them and sit and talk with them. What an incredible experience! They'd been excited when it sounded like he was headed for Jerusalem, because maybe they'd finally get to see him for themselves, rather than just listen to what other people had to say about him.

Sunday had been thrilling, when they'd all run to the city gates and welcomed him in. And it had been exciting to see him for themselves, to listen to him speak. Some of them had been close enough serving tables where he was eating, that they had been able to listen from just outside the room – and all of that was every bit as amazing as they'd heard. But there was also something strange going on, something they hadn't expected. He seemed bent on making the rulers mad, and that just didn't make sense. One of the first things any servant had learned if they wanted to

live past the age of ten was to do everything in their power to avoid making the boss mad. Keep your head down, stay out of sight, do what they tell you to do, play by the rules. But Jesus didn't seem to know that – or care about it – or something. He just kept picking at them and their traditions and their laws and their behavior. Maybe he'd been able to get away with that in Nazareth, but Jerusalem wasn't like that, and there was trouble brewing. It didn't look good. It didn't feel good. Everybody was uneasy. And the servants who had dared to feel such hope were stunned with the way things were turning out. They'd heard enough whispers to not be surprised when Jesus was arrested, but they were heart-broken. And disappointed. How they had longed and prayed that it wouldn't come to this. And then that scene before the chief priests and elders and scribes had just made them sick. They'd stood on the edge of the crowd and been shocked that people could and would make up such lies about him. And that he had just stood there silent and taken it all, and not even tried to defend himself. How had it come to this? They had hoped he would accomplish so much. For the first time in their lives, they had actually believed things could be different. But for what? Where had their hopes gotten them now, except disappointed yet again?

Perhaps it was from that sort of swirl of heartbroken love and crumbling hopes that the servant girl approached Peter. She needed to talk with someone who knew him personally, someone she thought would love him as much as she did, someone who perhaps could help her understand what Jesus was doing, why he was behaving the way he was. Someone who would share her sadness and grief and disappointment – and help her make sense of it all at the very same time. And so she approached him and said, you were with him, the one from Nazareth. Before she could ask Peter to tell her about him, he started protesting, I do not know or understand what you are talking about. And then he walked away. She didn't mean to be a pest, but she couldn't keep herself from following him out to the gateway. A rooster crowed and she saw a strange look come over his face, which had her hesitate for a couple of moments. But then she approached him again, and along the way turned to some of the others she knew were as interested in Jesus as she was, and said, this man is one of them, he knows him, maybe he can help us understand. But all Peter did was denied ever having seen the man. Then someone else in the crowd asked him again, certainly you are one of them, clearly you come from Galilee. I hear it in your voice, I see it in your clothes. By then Peter was really agitated and angry, stomping his feet and flailing his arms: I have no idea who you are talking about. Leave me alone! And then a rooster crowed a second time, and he just fell in a heap and wept as if someone had torn his heart out of his very soul.

If only Peter could have known that it wasn't all about him. They weren't after him, at least not everybody was. If only Peter could have found a way out his desperation and fear and heartbreak and confusion – he might have found someone who loved his Lord as much as he did. He might have felt less alone. He might have known a moment's companionship there in the courtyard; in company with the others who were there he might have found the courage to stand by Jesus. But Peter's fear was so strong, so overwhelming, so paralyzing and controlling, that he couldn't hear the love in her voice. His fear had closed him off from everything his senses might have otherwise told him. He wasn't open to love or hope or faith or discipleship or anything else. Fear had grabbed him in the pit of his stomach like a bear just out of a winter's hibernation chewing on the first food it's seen in months. There was no reasoning with the sort of fear that had taken possession of Peter, and so instead he denied the best friend he'd ever known in life, he stood by

helpless and watched him die, he collapsed in a puddle and wept from the depths of his soul because there was no tomorrow. Not without Jesus. Not from this place of failure. Not in light of his denial and defection and betrayal.

Except that in the grace of Jesus' love, there was a tomorrow. If Peter didn't come to believe that when Jesus rose from the dead, he must have when Jesus came to him some days later and sent him back out – to feed God's sheep and tend God's lambs. And the tomorrow that Peter was offered could have been kinder and gentler, more gracious and less haunted if he'd found a way out of his fear, and let himself feel the love of that servant girl and those others in the courtyard. Fear isolates us and holds us captive in our own nightmares. Love breaks down barriers, builds bridges and heals broken hearts.

In that courtyard, love was met with fear and as a result both persons were diminished and damaged – until Jesus was raised and offered the grace of healing. I pray that when we're there, trapped in our fear and failings, we'll find the strength and the courage to open ourselves to love. Trusting that God accepts us as we are, and that love will carry us through.