

“Not Just Then and There”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
John 20:1-18

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Easter Sunday

A week ago we were sledding on fresh snow down the side hill of our house with a banked turn to avoid slipping into the pond, which was just melting at its edge, but upon which we had walked just days earlier. Today, there is no sign of a sled path, and the goldfinches are quickly revealing their full yellow plumage. With their nine week protective blanket of snow removed, daffodils are emerging with a vengeance, though I am not sure one should use vengeance and daffodils together. Finally, after a season called Lent, which means spring, it feels like Easter.

Allow me to offer a different picture for this Easter morning. The leaves on the trees are beginning to turn shades of yellow, red and orange, with some trees already having dropped most of their leaves, and await raking. The male goldfinches are beginning to molt from bright yellow to olive gray. A first frost has zapped all but the most hearty flowers and the vegetable garden is yielding its last harvest of squashes and cabbages that survive the colder, longer nights. If you don't identify the season, let me add the opportunity to pick your own apples is in full swing. What season is it?

Yes, it is fall, autumn, and I offer this different scene of Easter, not to try to depress you after a long winter, but to simply remind us half the world celebrates the Resurrection as the fall season sets in with shorter days and falling leaves. My point is to avoid the too simplistic understanding of resurrection new life as simply being spring new life. I also offer this to caution us when we view faith only through the lens of the northern hemisphere, or fail to recognize the filter of European culture that has dominated in shaping the church and its theology.

Our Easter reading is John's account of the empty tomb. It takes place in the morning, as do the other three gospels, but as we will hear, it begins not at dawn, but while it was still dark. In the other gospels a group of women come with spices. In John, Mary Magdalene “comes to the garden alone, while the dew is still...” Let me just say, if you like the hymn, “In the Garden,” this is the gospel account on which it is based. Mary does not come with spices, because in John's Gospel, Nicodemus had already fulfilled this burial ritual with Joseph of Arimathea.

As we hear John's account of the empty tomb, note the three times, to three different people, that Mary seeks help based on her contention Jesus' body has been stolen. John 20:1-18:

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them,*

*“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”*

*Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the*

*linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.*

*They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"*

*She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."*

*When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.*

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?"*

*Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him,*

*"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

*She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!"*

*(which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,*

*"I have seen the Lord";*

*and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

A Mary without spices can lead to spicy rumors. If a survey were taken of Mary Magdalene's occupation, more than a few of us would check "prostitute." As I mentioned during our Holy Week service on Wednesday, medieval church and secular tradition began to blend together the New Testament's sinful women and it seems all the Mary's except Jesus' mother, to create and come up with one spectacularly colorful Mary Magdalene. The rumors continue as best selling novels promote a more than a platonic relationship between her and Jesus to the point of marriage and child bearing. Just this week my eye caught a headline on [cnn.com](http://cnn.com) that asked, "Did Mary Magdalene bankroll Jesus?" I bit. I clicked on the link expecting to read Jesus' ministry was funded by profits from Mary's purported profession. It did not, but I did learn there has been a series on CNN entitled, "Finding Jesus: Fact. Faith. Forgery," and the bankrolling question is answered in the concluding episode tonight at 9. Today such funding would be called Mary Magdalene's PAC, Political Action Committee.

As I thought about the rumors surrounding Mary Magdalene, I also thought about our human tendency to label people. Not even the most inclusive of us are immune from lumping those of the tea party or evangelical Christians into a single stereotypical group. On the other side, some conservative Christians suggest those advocating for certain social justice issues cannot be true Christians. Few of us are completely free of the biases seeded in us at an early age. Many of us have inherited stereotypes of race, culture or religion from which we have spent a lifetime seeking to rid ourselves.

As with Mary Magdalene, what subtly happens is what we consider to be an innocent description becomes a definition, and that definition morphs into a label or stereotype. This often happens when we define others by the “what” of their existence. That “what” may be race or class, ethnicity or religion, gender or orientation, hairstyle or hoodie, piercing or tattoo, age or ability, occupation or politics. When we define by “what” of someone’s existence or belief, rather than “who” of their being, it is much easier to succumb to name calling. It also means we set up hurtful “us-them” divisions.

Take away the “what” of Mary Magdalene, whether prostitute or bank roller, and we may find ourselves walking alongside her in that garden; no, not at the literal burial cave, but because we too have pondered the death of an innocent one, wept about the senseless loss of one we admired and followed, and perhaps even questioned the very existence of a God who is supposed to love and protect the innocent and faithful.

How do we understand death that comes too early in terms of years? How do we explain early onset Alzheimer’s Disease? Some make death and tragedy understandable by speaking of the will of God. I myself find it hard to reconcile tragedy such as the killings this week in Kenya with any grand plan of a loving God. Of course, that leaves me having to live with more questions than answers, more mystery than certainty. I carry those questions, that mystery, into the garden, to walk alongside Mary Magdalene.

The church has sometimes taught the idea of God and faith being an insurance policy to protect one from tragedy, hardship, or too early a death. With such a view, when tragedy, hardship, or too early a death occur, the explanation is it is either God’s will or our sin. Many reject that view, drop the insurance policy, and let go of God and faith. I would suggest that is not the only option.

In my own faith view, I do not expect an answer to my “Why?” questions, for I do not believe in a God of total control. As I shared in a sermon in Lent, while for some that diminishes God’s omnipotence, for me the power of God is the power of a presence. It is such a presence Mary meets in the garden.

I am estimating this is about my twentieth Easter sermon. I don’t know for sure since before our move to Massachusetts last summer, I took six boxes of sermons to the dump. I am guessing many of those sermons were based on John’s Easter morning account. Still, this year, as I again pondered that same text, a phrase came to me I do not recall having used before: The incarnation is over. It came to me upon reading, “The cross brings the incarnation to a close.” [O’Day, Gail, in New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX, Luke and John, Abingdon: Nashville, 1993, pp. 844] The incarnation we celebrated at Christmas is over.

On Friday, Good Friday, Jesus breathed his last, which is a gentle way of saying the human Jesus died. God incarnate, God in the flesh, died. The incarnation is over.

It is suggested this is what was confirmed by the first disciple to reach the tomb, who believed, though he did not yet understand. That is the sense of mystery I still bring to each Easter morning. The incarnation is over, death has come, and death still stinks; yet, even though we may not fully understand, even though we cannot fully explain it, we sense with the disciple, the empty tomb added a phrase: death is not victorious, death is not the final answer.

I have read 85% of Americans, not just Christians, believe life does not end with the grave. It thus makes sense people link that belief with Easter worship. We are here today for various reasons. As a pastor, I am expected to work on Easter Sunday. Some of you may be here out of an obligation to do things with the family. Some are here because of this congregation's tradition of excellent music to accompany our own alleluia's. For others, it is the beauty of the flowers, paralleling the arrival of our hemisphere's Spring. I will also venture to suggest most of us have come with a sense that this Easter story is our story in that there is something revealed by an empty tomb, even if we cannot explain it, and even if we don't believe in a bodily resurrection.

We sense a spiritual dimension in life. We seek to know more about the questions of living, of evil, of God's presence in the world and part in our lives. For most, neither a logical explanation of Easter, nor simply blind faith will satisfy our quest. In a real sense, we are like Mary Magdalene, coming to a garden while it was still dark, without explainable reason or purpose.

Easter is very much linked to belief in an afterlife, sometimes called "eternal life," and often referred to as heaven, the place to which we go after death. John's gospel is consistent with this understanding, and yet the gift of eternal life for John is not just for the then and there, but the here and now. For John, the idea of things will be better in the sweet by and by is not the power of resurrection life.

Jesus, asks Mary, "For whom are you looking?," and becomes the third person from whom she seeks help in finding Jesus' stolen body. Then, Jesus calls her by name, "Mary!" With that name calling, Mary moved into the realm of resurrection, and hope. She could leave the garden, not because she found a resuscitated Jesus, but because of an assurance his presence lived on. "I have seen the Lord," she tells the disciples to whom Jesus sent her.

Mary's declaration of "I have seen the Lord" is a statement of resurrection faith and hope. As Gail O'Day writes in her biblical commentary on John, "The fact of Jesus' risen body...is not the heart of the Easter proclamation. ... The heart of the Easter proclamation is when we are claimed by the truth of resurrection." [O'Day, Gail, in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, p. 379]

Resurrection forever changes how God will be known in the world. Jesus has died, but his body was not stolen, and Christ's presence will remain. There may be a certain ease with which can receive Easter as spring emerges, paralleling resurrection life and nature's new life, and simply put the heavenly promise in our pocket like a "get out of Hell free" card, and simply go on living as we please. But again, the promise of eternal life is not just a future hope, but begins here now, as the work of enabling heaven to be made known on earth is for Mary to proclaim and ours to live. As Jon Meacham has written,

"...heaven as a manifestation of God's love on earth ... should inspire the religious to open their arms more often than they point [their] fingers. Heaven ... becomes ... the reality one creates in the service of the poor, the sick, the enslaved, the oppressed. It is not paradise in the sky but acts of selflessness and love that bring God's sacred space and grace to a broken world suffused with tragedy until ... the unknown hour when the world we struggle to piece together is made whole again...." [Meacham, Jon, "Heaven Can't Wait," Time, April 16, 2012]

When Jesus called Mary by name, it was of no concern to him “what” she was or wasn’t. He affirmed “whose” she was. The scene is framed in intimacy, marking the relationship we also have with God because of Jesus. We are God’s children, here and now. Our responsibility as Easter people is to live within the resurrection hope, to work for the heavenly presence on this earth, by committing to welcome all, not based on “what” they are, or what we perceive them to be, but to welcome them by name, because of “whose” they are.

We are the caretakers of resurrection hope, having been gifted with a promise for the then and there, but living out the hope of the promise in the here and now. It is particularly important to witness to such hope in the fall seasons, as when nature’s death is looming, and in those deep dawn times, when we grasp to understand what is happening in our lives and the tragedies of the world tempt us to live in despair, when we doubt there will be light at the end of the tunnel and we cannot imagine seeing the break of a new day.

It was out of a deep dawn that Mary saw light, and was called by name, and was sent to tell the resurrection good news for the here and now. As the hymn verse goes, “I’d stay in the garden, but he bids me go...” As sharers of her story, we too have been called by name, and bid to go, sent from the garden with resurrection good news to share with the loving, delightful vengeance of those daffodils.