

April 1, 2018 • Easter Sunday • Family Sunday

## “Love God/Love Creation: Alive to Love and Beauty”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



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? Whom are you looking for?” 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.*

What a glorious morning it is to gather together and give praise to our God. For it is God who rolls away the stone. God who raises Jesus up to new life beyond the grave. God who confounds everyone’s expectations and worst nightmares. God who defies the authority of the powers and principalities. God who defeats death itself. God who makes each of us alive to love and beauty.

Now there’s a call-and-response we do here each year on Easter Sunday. It goes like this: I say “Christ is Risen!” And together we respond: “HE IS RISEN INDEED!”

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED.

What a glorious morning this is. To those first incredulous disciples, it had seemed that all had been lost, that their hope had been in vain. They had been with him in the Garden of Gethsemane where he had prayed and asked them to pray with him. Some had dared venture to Golgotha to see him brutally put to death. They all knew that his body had been laid in a tomb in a garden nearby.

It was Mary Magdalene who went into that garden on the first day of the new week, while it was still dark. The stone at the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. She ran to tell the others and bid them come, but none could yet understand what they were seeing. The disciples, bewildered, returned home, not yet understanding or trusting the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

It was Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the Apostles as she is now called in the church, Mary Magdalene who dared stay, weeping yes, but somehow finding the courage to not look away, to persist with her questions. Mary Magdalene who pursued truth.

A man appears there with her in the garden and she assumes him to be--the gardener! She asks about Jesus and where the body had been taken. But then he speaks and she hears his voice. He calls her by name, and the truth is revealed to her. She hears his voice and sees who he really is. He is not dead, but lives, just as he had promised. She runs to tell the others: “I have seen the Lord!”

Christ is risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Mary Magdalene has just grasped the truth that is at the heart of our faith—that in death, new life is revealed. The writer Anne Lamott puts it this way: “death is the end of dying, but not of life.”

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To get to this realization, it’s fitting that Mary Magdalene first thinks that the gardener is standing beside her. For throughout his time with them on earth, Jesus, their Teacher, often turned to images of nature to help them understand faith and the love of God, to help them grasp the deep meanings of life and death. Remember some of those?

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field; which indeed is smaller than all seeds. But when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.”

“The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he’s asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens...First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens.”

All along, Jesus was using images from nature, from farming, and gardening, to teach us about dying into life, leaving the old behind so that the new can emerge, alive to love and beauty.

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED.

This is not easy stuff to grasp, is it? It's sort of all paradoxical and counter-intuitive. No wonder we often look and act exactly like those first disciples on that first Easter morning. We are often just as confused as they were, in the dark, forgetting scripture and the promise, rambling on with countless questions and doubts, failing to trust, fearing the worst. Going home to close the blinds, lock the doors, and pull the covers up over our heads. Hunkering down, when we should be witnessing to the world, by our words and attitudes and actions just how radically awesome is the love and power of our God.

This is not unique to us and to our generation. Seems to be part and parcel of the human condition. We grow weary and cynical. We forget all God's benefits. The things of this world overwhelm and confound us and cause our feet to stray from the path of life. We give up way too soon, just as those first disciples were tempted to do that first Easter morning, still in the dark.

Jesus understands. Remember his words in the Gospel of Luke? The disciples had gathered after his death, locked the doors, cowering in fear. Yet even so he appeared among them saying, "Why are you so perturbed? Why do questions arise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see."

Jesus understands. So maybe we shouldn't be surprised to learn what the most frequent command in the Bible is. Head and shoulders above all others. Over 300 times, the Word of God calls us out with the command, the reminder, the instruction, the invitation--to "Fear not." "Do not be afraid." As we hear it in 2 Timothy: "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of wise discretion."

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Not a spirit of fear. A spirit of power, and of love, and of wise discretion. Even when things seem totally incomprehensible, like an empty tomb and a missing body. Like a world gone senseless. Times when it's so hard to find our way and find our voice and keep our feet on the path of life.

Notice how the Risen Lord interacts with Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morn. He is straightforward. Compassionate. Respectful. Empowering

"Mary," he says, cutting through the fog and the fear. "Mary." The sheep knows the voice of the Good Shepherd. Just as he had told them: "My sheep know my voice, and I know them. They follow me, and I give them eternal life..."

"Mary," he calls. That one simple act opens her eyes and the eyes of her heart. She is no longer afraid. She is no longer alone. She is, as she always has been, a beloved child of God. And He is, as he had said, he is risen from the dead.

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Beloved Child of God. Risen Lord. With that established, he empowers her to get on with living. He explains what's happening and he gives her work to do. Go and tell the others. Go!

It is said that in the old days, on Easter night as the worship service was ending, Russian peasants would light candles and carry the blessed light of Christ home. As they would leave the church, walking to their homes, the light would scatter and travel in all directions through the darkness, and the darkness would be pierced and dispelled as lamps came on in the windows of their farmhouses, one by one...[for] the glory of God sleeps everywhere, ready to blaze out unexpectedly... "Earth's crammed with heaven!" as the poet puts it.

May we, each and every one, be born to anew to love and beauty this Easter Day, hearing God calling us by name—beloved child of God, carrying the light to every place of darkness. Casting out the spirit of fear. Grounding our hope in God's spirit of power and of love and of wise discernment. Remembering, in the words of Clement of Alexandria from the 2nd century:

Everything belongs to the God of goodness.  
Everything belongs to the God of beauty.  
Everything belongs to the God of wisdom.  
Everything belongs to the God of justice.  
To God, glory now and forever!

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Alleluia! Amen.

Notes:

Anne Lamott Facebook post. September 8, 2014 · (Thanks to the Rev. Wayne Walters for quoting this in the recent Memorial Service for our dear friend, Becky Haase.)

Russian peasants story based on Thomas Merton in *The New Man*.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning "Earth's crammed with heaven."

Clement of Alexandria quoted in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker: *Saving Paradise—How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

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First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403  
www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258