

Sermon, April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday

This just doesn't seem right, does it? This is Easter morning, the Highest Holy Day and most joyous celebration in the Christian calendar. It commemorates the resurrection of Jesus, which bought with it the hope of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life for all of us. This was the ultimate act of love from the God we worship. The God who adores us in spite of ourselves. I haven't missed an Easter morning worship service in the last thirty-seven years or so, and never missed it in my youth. The lights are normally bright, the pews are full of family and friends, and we sing some of the most beautiful songs ever written. The choir is always in its element. The handbells too when we have had them. Even when it is chilly outside, on Easter morning, spring is in the air. This, unfortunately, is not that.

Liz Lewis was the first to suggest to me that when Sunday worship finally returns to some sort of normalcy, we should celebrate that Sunday as Easter. Many folks agree. In the meantime, let us continue to do what we can, to be patient, to stay calm and safe, and to be assured, in anticipation of that great day to come.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

O God, you gave your only son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, that we may live with him forever on the joy of the resurrection, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the twentieth chapter.

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.

The Gospel of the Lord

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

Amen

Every year the Revised Common lectionary gives us a choice of which gospel story to read on Easter morning. This year it was between Matthew's and John's versions, and while the Celebrate Bulletin Insert (that may have been uploaded for you) printed Matthew, I instead chose John.

Why? Because in the Matthew text when the risen Jesus met Mary Magdalene for this first time--after walking out of his tomb, mind you—the first thing he said to her was...are you ready for it?...”Greetings.”

You've got to be kidding...GREETINGS? After suffering a ghastly, humiliating and excruciating death, and then being raised from the grave by all the powers of heaven; in announcing God's eternal salvation intended for all of humanity—that's really all he said?---“Greetings?” Is Easter just another “Hallmark Moment?”

Skeptics like to point out that the Gospels don't agree on much about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. They note that sometimes he appears as ghost or phantom vanishing into thin air or mysteriously materializing inside a locked room. But then sometimes the Risen Jesus seems down to earth and very human, cooking breakfast by the Sea of Galilee and even sitting down to eat a meal with his disciples.

Yet at other times he seems to be able to make himself unrecognizable, like today as the gardener, or elsewhere as a stranger walking along a road.

They also note that Matthew describes only one post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. Luke has two, John four, and Mark, probably the earliest of the gospels, doesn't have any. Paul, writing decades before

even Mark was put to paper, apparently knew of other appearances of the risen Jesus--ones the Gospel writers didn't.

Some say the risen Jesus appeared only in Galilee, and others only in Jerusalem. John says both. So no wonder they ask, "with all these differences, just what exactly ARE we supposed to believe about Easter anyway?"

First, I'd point out to them that, "When a group of people decides to make up a story, you know—tell a lie-- the first thing they do is make sure they're all telling the same story." Early Christians obviously didn't do that.

And then I'd mention that the one part of the Easter story that the gospels DO all agree on is Mary Magdalene, and I doubt they would have made that part up. Either alone or with friends, the gospels agree that Mary is the one who came first to the tomb. And all agree she was the first person to whom the risen Jesus was revealed, either by angels or Jesus himself.

The word apostle comes from the Greek word apostolos, meaning "sent one." And since she was first sent to tell others that Jesus had been raised from the dead, Mary Magdalene is known by many as the Apostle to the Apostles.

And that's pretty surprising when you think about it, because in patriarchal biblical cultures folks generally did not believe the testimony of women. They considered them too emotional and their witness unreliable--so much so that they weren't allowed to testify in court.

So the only reason I can think of why the gospel authors would all say Mary was the star witness to the resurrection—was that despite how awkward and inconvenient that was, it was...true! I admit I didn't really know much about Mary Magdalene. Do you?

In the collectivist cultures of the ancient Near East, knowing where a person was from or what family they belong to told people just about everything they needed to know about them. So the Bible's various Marys are typically distinguished as, for example, Mary the mother of Joseph, or the Mary the mother of Jesus, or Mary of Bethany.

Magdalene indicates this particular Mary was from the Galilean town named Magdala Nunayya, meaning "tower of the fishes." That was a lakeside village just a few miles from Capernaum where Jesus made his home for a while. Magdala was also known by its Greek name Tarichaea, which means something like "processed fishville." Yum.

The Bible doesn't say how Mary from Magdala met up with Jesus. In most of the gospel accounts she is only mentioned toward the end of the story, but in Luke Mary Magdalene shows up early as one of the dedicated followers who traveled with Jesus from Galilee on his long road trip to Jerusalem.

When included in a list of people in the Bible, she is nearly always mentioned first. That implies she was the most important one.

In fact she heads the list of women who footed the bill for the ministry of Jesus' and his disciples, so I guess it's safe to assume she was either a single woman from a prosperous family or perhaps a rich widow. Later writings and fictional works like *The Da Vinci Code* make her out to be some sort of romantic interest for Jesus, but nothing in the Bible points to that.

Nobody knows what happened to Mary after the first Easter. The Eastern Church says she headed east. The Western Church says she headed west. Of course they do. Some say Mary invented the Easter Egg, but I'm pretty sure she didn't. Medieval paintings of Mary Magdalene typically portray her as a young, beautiful and sensuous woman, usually suffering from varying degrees of what today would be

known as wardrobe malfunctions. It wasn't until Vatican II that her honor and reputation were finally restored.

But why WOULD Jesus choose to appear first to Mary? I'm guessing because he trusted her most, knowing she most trusted in him. Defying all the negative stereotypes, while Jesus' male friends were busy betraying, running away from and denying that they even knew Jesus, she's the one who stayed with him. All the way to the cross, and even the tomb.

The only mistake Mary Magdalene made that we know of, was that she came to the tomb this morning expecting a corpse rather than a savior. Sure, he had promised he would be raised. But unlike the others, she had been there, watching him suffer, and breathing his last breath. Even after that she stuck with her Jesus, following to see exactly where his lifeless body was laid to rest so she could tend to that too.

This year I wonder if maybe I have misunderstood what I always assumed to be the identity cloaking of Jesus in this story.

Did he not want her to recognize him?

Or I wonder if instead Mary just made the same mistake we often do—not recognizing God, even when he is right in front of us in plain view. And then wondering to ourselves, or even out loud, Where is God, when we need him?

These days it is easy NOT to recognize God, or even special people clearly doing God's work. Especially when they are wearing things like this (glasses) this (mask) and these (Gloves.) Like when we are home watching the news, and see all those dedicated medical professionals voluntarily putting themselves at risk to care for those who are sick and struggling. And folks doing their best to keep this calamitous disease from spreading to their own families, as well as ours.

I think about our own people these days doing the same. Like my cousin Justine. She is a front-line Emergency Medicine physician at a major hospital. I think of our other doctors too, like our own Tom, Abby and Todd. And Physicians Assistants, Like Janelle. Along with all the doctors, nursing staff and therapists at Garrett Regional Medical Center and nursing students like Amy and Meghan doing their rotations.

How about Valerie? She's a retired nursing professor, busy these days sewing badly-needed protective masks for health care workers.

Hopefully we all recognize God in front of us, in the faces of overworked and underpaid cashiers, those delivering supplies, stocking shelves and cleaning and sanitizing essential businesses, that are staying open to keep us all alive and comfortable.

How about teachers like Sean and Debi, going online to educate our children as best they can. And playing and singing for us this morning. And teachers like Nicole and Ashley, presenting our Children's Sermon this morning and hosting e-Sunday School to assure our children that we'll all be okay. So don't be scared.

This year I recognize God when I think of someone like John, who is working overtime delivering Meals on Wheels and bussing patients to doctor's offices and dialysis appointments. And so many thousands like them all over the world, of our faith, other faiths or even no faith, selflessly trying to help and serve their neighbors, who need them.

So maybe it doesn't really matter where or how many times or in what form the risen Jesus appeared in the gospels. He came first and foremost to those who really needed him. And I think he still does that in so many ways. In the end, neither Matthew nor Mark nor Luke nor John nor even Paul really got the last word when it comes to the Jesus story. Because it is a story still being written...every day.

Although I still have a hard time picturing Jesus walking up to me and saying, “Greetings.” But it turns out in Matthew that’s not really what he said anyway. In the original Greek Jesus’ first word to Mary was *xairete*. That word appears twelve times in the New Testament, and nowhere else is it translated as “Greetings.” *Xairete* instead means “rejoice!” So today as we’re gathered here virtually or in person to celebrate Easter, let us do just that. *Xairete*—rejoice! Because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Alleluia, and Amen.