

*Beginning Again...Again*  
John 20:1-18

Easter: the day we have been waiting for, preparing for. Today we celebrate the triumph of life over death, hope over despair, light over darkness. Those are big ideas. They've inspired the making of great music. They've made people all over the world, for centuries, grateful and glad. This day is enough to get us to put on our best clothes and our best worship and *be at church!* But is Easter something that's supposed to change the way we live? Is it something that we'll still be thinking about next week, or even tomorrow?

I stopped for a sandwich at lunchtime one day this week. The woman at the counter asked me where I work, and when I said "Campbell United Methodist Church—you know, the building that looks like an upside-down ark, at Winchester and Hamilton," she got it immediately, that this must be a busy week for me. "When I was growing up, Easter was such a big thing," she said, spontaneously. "We got all dressed up in new clothes, and my whole family went to church, and we were so excited! But it's not like that any more..." and she trailed off. She felt kind of sorry for me, I think; that I work for an institution whose best days are behind it. But she still made me pay for my sandwich.

If nostalgia is what we're celebrating on Easter morning; if Easter is the most important day of the year for the church because *it used to really mean something*, then that kind woman *should* have felt sorry for me, and we should all have just gone directly to brunch this morning.

But this day is not about nostalgia. I also don't think it's about whether Jesus' body literally disappeared from the tomb on that first Easter morning. And it's not just about what will happen to us after we die—although there's good news there too. I think the meaning of Easter is not so much about life after death, as it is *life before death*. About our lives, yours and mine. About what tomorrow might look like, and the day after that and the day after that—when you're not at church, when you're not all dressed up in your finest clothes and on your best behavior. Resurrection has to make a difference when you go back to work, or school, or driving the carpool, or volunteering at the hospital, or sitting alone in your kitchen.

To find that meaning, though, we have to dig into the Easter story a bit. You have to pay attention to the details of the story, because otherwise, its meaning gets swallowed up in what is more obvious, and so much easier for us to explain: how daffodils grow out of dried-up old bulbs, cocoons turn into butterflies, eggs hatch. You know...all those things that are much easier to shape into chocolate.

The real Easter story is harder to understand. It's less straightforward, more complicated. More like real life.

Jesus died. His friends, his co-workers, and his family were left with their grief. It happened so fast. They'd known he was living dangerously, saying things that could get him in trouble with powerful people. But enough that he could be tried, convicted and executed? This good man? A man who healed people? A man whose only message was love, non-violence, forgiveness? Things like that aren't supposed to happen..

I know grief; perhaps you do too; you put one foot in front of the other, and you keep moving—or you don't; but no one has to teach you how to feel it. Even in grief, women are doers, and so Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on this morning the third day after Jesus had been buried. No matter how sad you are, there is always something that needs doing. She hadn't been able to sleep much, so it was early, still dark when she got there. And the first thing she saw was that the stone that was supposed to keep the tomb closed had been moved. When she saw that things were out of place, she didn't think about resurrection. Just as we might have suspected if we'd been there, Mary was thinking that someone stole Jesus' body—a theft. One more indignity, when there had already been too much. She was afraid. So she ran (“run” is exactly the verb the Gospel uses); she ran to tell Peter and John—not that they'd know what to do; just so she wouldn't be alone.

And then the Gospel story gets a tiny bit comical. Peter and John ran to the tomb, looked around, confirmed for themselves that Mary was right, and then they ran right back home. There was a great deal of running that morning. That's what we do when shocking things happen: we run around a lot.

Here's the detail I want to pay attention to today: When Mary came back to the tomb with Peter and John, it was the second time she'd been there that morning. And this time she stayed. Not for good news; she didn't expect anything good to happen in that cemetery where her friend was buried. This time, Mary looked into the tomb. She went in further than she had the first time. She went all the way in, so that she could see into the cave for herself.

As she tiptoed into that scary blackness, she heard something. She heard a voice. “Why are you crying?” the voice asked. “Who are you looking for” ... Which is sort of like asking, “What are you hoping you'll find here in this darkness?” Mary didn't even look up. She assumed it was the gardener, the hired help; she answered him politely, but automatically—in that “I can't really talk to you about this now” voice. “They took him,” she said. “I don't know where he is.”

And then the voice speaks again. “Mary,” it says. Her name. The word is familiar; the voice is familiar; she has heard them before. She stops sniffing; her ears go more alert. And this time she turns around and looks up, behind her, into the light. And sees that it is him. Jesus, the one she came here looking for, without even knowing exactly what she was hoping for—maybe that she might get just one more look at him. If you have ever lost someone you loved, you know the feeling, the need. One more look. And there he was, looking—feeling to her—more alive than she thought she'd ever see him again.

This was what she had come for. No, actually it wasn't. It was what it had never occurred to her to hope for. It was incredible, wonderful. Completely incomprehensible, but good in some strange way.

Here's the thing I find encouraging this morning: she didn't get it at first. When Jesus told them he would rise from the dead; that they shouldn't worry if he died, because he was going ahead of them to prepare a new place, a new way of living, she hadn't really heard it, or understood. She didn't make sense of it when she got to the tomb the first time that morning and saw that the body was missing. She didn't even get it the first time she heard someone in there with her. She got it when she stayed around long enough to hear that familiar voice. She got it when she was willing to go all the way into the darkness, to see for herself.

Finally, on what was for her the second, or third, or maybe hundredth time he said it, Mary heard what Jesus had been trying to say all along. What she—and we—long to hear: that *everything* ends in life—even death. That even in a world where innocent people die, there's more reason for joy than for cynicism. That there is light that can enter even our darkest secrets, our heaviest burdens, our most hopeless scenarios. That in Jesus' rising from his death, there is the promise that we can rise from our lives.

Most of us have heard the Easter story before—maybe dozens of times. Most of us still aren't quite sure we've gotten the point, or that it makes any difference. Resurrection is a slippery concept. We don't *feel* resurrected. What would that feel like? But you are here today...to hear the story again. Maybe because *this* time, there's some shadow in your own life that just won't go away. Some darkness you have no choice but to walk all the way into. Maybe today you can hear this: that inside what feels to you like shadow, or darkness, or even death, there is a light. Someone calling your name. Maybe this time, you can hear the voice of hope, even if it comes from the most unlikely source. The religion you gave up on a long time ago. The story you've heard a million times before. The gardener.

Answering that voice is not easy or unthinking work. In his famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl tells a story about his fellow prisoners in a Nazi prison camp during World War II. They had been held captive for so long that when they were released, Frankl said, "they walked out into the sunlight, blinked nervously, and then silently walked back into the familiar darkness of the prisons, darkness to which they had been accustomed for such a long time."

We too are inclined to get comfortable in our familiar darkness.

The message of Easter is that God is not willing to leave us there. No matter how deep, the shadow in your life is no bigger or stronger than the darkness of that tomb that held Jesus. "Come out," God says—to him, to you. "I need you out here. Alive. In the world, not in that cave."

Maybe the best news this morning is that resurrection happens more than once. There is always another chance, another hope, another voice that will speak to us of new life—no matter how many times we've heard it before, no matter how many times we have *failed* to hear it before.

Do you know this symbol? ¶

It means "new paragraph". It means: the story goes on. No matter how stuck you have been, no matter how dark the shadow or how much of your life the shadow has come to fill, no matter how many times before you have *not* been resurrected, there is a new paragraph to be written. God has not stopped speaking to you. You are not beyond the possibility of new life.

Resurrection doesn't happen only on Easter. Every day, every moment, you are invited to start again. To begin a new paragraph that will take you closer to the life you were meant to live. There is a new paragraph waiting to be started—in your story, in God's story.

Christ is risen. May you rise too.

