

What's In a Name? Easter Homily

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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John 20:1-18

On Easter, I prefer sermons with only one point. But today I'm going to offer a brief peek in four different directions.

This year Lent began with lovers and ends with fools. For the first time since 1945, Ash Wednesday landed on Valentine's Day. And Easter lands on April Fool's Day for the first time since 1956. A few months back when I first realized that Easter was going to be April 1 this year I thought I would just tell jokes for my sermon. It's part of an old tradition. In the Orthodox Christian Church Easter Monday is celebrated as "The Day of Joy and Laughter." You see, on Good Friday the Devil thought he had won. But Sunday came and...SURPRISE! The joke was on him!

What music does the Easter bunny like? Hip hop.

What do you call ten Easter bunnies marching backwards? A receding hareline.

A farmer plays a prank on Easter Sunday. After the egg hunt, he sneaks into the chicken coop and replaces every white egg with a brightly colored one. Minutes later, the rooster walks in. He spots the colored eggs, then storms out and beats up the peacock.

One more. I have told it before several times, but it's so good. Like the Easter story...worth repeating. This will segue into my second point.

It was a dark and stormy night. Wind and rain. A man walking home decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery and he fell into a freshly dug grave, ready for the burial the next morning. He tried to climb back out. But the grave was deep, the sides were steep, and he repeatedly fell back into the grave. He hollered for help, but the storm was raging and his voice dissipated into nothingness. No one would hear him. Finally, he realized it was hopeless, so he settled down into a corner of the grave to wait out a miserable night until he would be rescued the next morning when people came for the burial.

A few minutes later, another man decided to take a shortcut walking through the cemetery. He fell into the same grave. And did not land on the first man. In fact, it was such a dark night he was entirely unaware of the man in the corner. So this second man, too, tried to scramble out. But the grave was deep and the sides were steep, and over and over he fell back down. The other man sat silently through these efforts and then finally said, "You can't get out of here."

But he did!

The power of fear! Is Easter a made-up story because people are afraid to stay in the grave? Is the Christian life only about the promise of heaven? I have always felt that the ethics of Jesus and the warmth of the life-giving community of the Church are enough to give my life to, without worrying about what happens after death.

Yet I do firmly believe in resurrection to new life, for a number of reasons. I simply don't have enough faith to believe in the existence of the Church apart from Jesus' resurrection. By all accounts, the disciples were totally knocked off their pins by Jesus' death. They were huddled miserably away, cowering cowardly out of sight, terrified that the next knock on the door would be the Roman soldiers hauling them off to nail them to their own crosses. And who would blame them for their fear?

But then suddenly they are transformed. They are no longer hiding. They are out in public boldly proclaiming the Way of Jesus. They are boldly proclaiming the Resurrection of Jesus—to all who would listen, even if it cost the disciples their lives, and for ten of them it did! Would you die for a lie? Something you *knew* was a lie? I wouldn't. Clearly, **THEY** believed in the Resurrection, the Resurrection of Jesus and the promise of their own resurrection.

And then in recent decades we have had all these reports of near-death experiences, which I find intriguing. One of the most thought-provoking I've ever read came from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. She became famous for her book, *On Death and Dying*, with the now well-known five stages of grief. In later books, she wrote about the afterlife. In her last book, she tells this story:

A twelve-year-old child who came back from a near-death experience decided not to tell her mother that dying in a car accident was (in fact) a beautiful experience. She didn't want to hurt her mother's feelings by telling her that she had been happy in a place greater than her home.

She had a need to talk about it, though, so she told her father that dying was a beautiful experience and she had not wanted to come back. In fact, not only was it an experience of light and openheartedness, she had been amazed to meet with someone who said he was her brother, who told her she was going to be fine. "He loved me so much," she said, "and he loved you and Mom, too. How could I have seen someone who said he was my brother? I don't have a brother."

Her father began to cry. "You did have a brother, but he died before you were born," her dad said. "We wanted to (wait to) tell you when you got older." (On Grief and Grieving, written with David Kessler, p. 113)

My own experience as a pastor and especially as a chaplain has helped convince me that God's love does not end at death. Harriett was a resident at the Presbyterian Homes of Roseville when I was the chaplain there. She had a condition that made it painful to stand or even sit up. Since lying down was the only comfortable position for her, she spent her days in a recumbent wheelchair, usually in the central gathering area outside her room. She had gradually lost her sight and when I met her, she was completely blind. She had loads of physical challenges, but she was mentally fully with it. I enjoyed chatting with her each day when I made my rounds. Because of her blindness, she no longer bothered to open her eyes when she conversed. Her son visited every day and so I got to know him, too.

Well, Harriett began the dying process. The doctors told us she had perhaps a few months to live. One day when Jim came to visit, he wheeled his mom into the library, where they could be alone. A few days later Jim told me what happened there that afternoon. He said to me, "We just sat there in a companionable silence, Mom lying in her wheelchair, eyes closed. I sat in a chair next to her, holding her hand. Then all of a sudden, she sat up. (I had never seen her sit up.) She opened her eyes wide, and, oh, Chaplain Bill, her eyes have never been so blue. She smiled broadly...and then laid back down...and was gone. Clearly," he concluded, "she had a vision of the next life."

I want to shift gears now for a few minutes. Direction three. Let's look at the scripture passage. John's account of the meeting in the cemetery is so fascinating, and I believe, profoundly moving. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. Now, forget what you've been told about Mary Magdalene being a prostitute. That is nowhere in the Bible. It's a later tradition, which mixes up two different women. All the scriptures tell us about Mary Magdalene is that (1) she had been healed by Jesus, (2) that she was at the Cross, and (3) that she came to the Tomb. So, Mary Magdalene came to the Tomb. In John's gospel, she was not coming to prepare the body. That's already been done by Nicodemus. She was simply coming to be near one she loved, as many people do in visiting cemeteries. She arrived to discover the stone had been rolled away and immediately she concluded that body snatchers had been there. So she ran back to Simon Peter and the "other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved,"...

Who is this "beloved disciple"? Most traditions say it was John, the brother of James. But a few, including my New Testament professor in seminary, suggest that it was Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha; Lazarus, the one Jesus had brought back from the dead a few chapters earlier. Isn't that interesting? Lazarus, the Beloved Disciple.

Mary ran to them and cried, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter and the other disciple raced to the tomb, saw that it is empty, and returned home. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb... and then peering into the tomb herself, she saw two angels in white. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She answered, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they

have laid him.” Then 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? Who 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, “My Teacher.”

Mary did not recognize Jesus until he called her by name.

Names in the Bible are a big deal. But they are a big deal most everywhere. During my sabbatical a few years ago, I focused on three areas, one of which was

Jesus called Mary by name. No doubt, John intends for the reader to recall the passage that Nathan read for us, in which Jesus said, “The gatekeeper opens the gate for (the shepherd) and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Mary did not recognize Jesus until he calls her by name. It’s such a lovely picture of God’s personal love for each one of us. Dear Ones, God knows you by name. And loves you, specifically. Individually. Unconditionally. Infinitely.

And then look at how the story ends...or rather, doesn’t end. Mary Magdalene ran to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” She is the first evangelist. She is the first to witness the Resurrection, to witness the Resurrection Truth of God, that hatred and fear and violence do not have the last word. The joke is on the Forces of Evil. Death is overcome by life. That was the message two thousand years ago, and today, and tomorrow, and always. The Easter message is the same: Love wins. Say it with me: “Love Wins!”

Most of the people of the world do not know that. The responsibility to carry that message to our hurting world...that responsibility belongs to whom today?

Our March Madness Hymn Contest winner is, fittingly enough, “Here I Am, Lord.” Those who are able are invited to stand as we sing Number 69, “Here I Am, Lord.” Note that the stanzas are the voice of God and the refrain is our response, “Here I am, Lord.” Number 69.