

Whom Are You Looking For?

An Easter Sermon by Louise F. Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Text: John 20:1-18

Easter fills me, not with anticipation, but with dread. It's the Christian mega-holiday, the joyful celebration of resurrection, the point upon which our faith—pardon me—hangs: that Jesus, crucified, died, and buried on Friday was walking around alive on Sunday. It's a breathtaking notion, if true. Life has landed the knock-out blow on Death, which is down for the count. The stone has been removed from the tomb where hope lay interred. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! The world has become a lily-scented garden, full of light and grace, and we walk in it, accompanied by the soaring strains of the Hallelujah Chorus.

And therein lies the dread: the world is no garden; the pervasive perfume of lilies, however sweet, cannot completely mask the stench of death. The most jubilant singing cannot quite drown out the cries of terror, tears of anguish, and rumble of warfare, the potent mix composing much of the soundtrack of contemporary life. This week we've witnessed the horror of another school shooting, by a lonely and deeply confused sixteen-year-old who sometimes fashioned his hair into devil's horns. We have pondered the question of what constitutes life, as courts and Congress attempted to address the matter of a woman who seems suspended somewhere between life and death, tethered to this world by a feeding tube. What does Christ's resurrection have to do with these tragic and troubling realities? For that matter, what does it have to do with us, you and me, and our busy, complicated every-day lives? While surfing the net trying to locate the source of a quotation I'm using later in the sermon, I found a website called "Absolutely Easter" offering information about "Christ, rabbits, chocolate, and games." I dread the reduction of Easter to the Church's annual rite of spring—though I admit it takes an act of faith to believe even that this year. Nature renews itself in a regular cycle of dying and rebirth; never-- before Jesus-- has it been claimed that an individual, dead and buried, emerged from the grave.

There is no Hallelujah Chorus backing up the gospel narrative of the first Easter morning. There is instead surprise, puzzlement, skepticism, weeping. Let us bring those familiar reactions and our own doubts and questions to the reading of the Easter gospel, in the twentieth chapter of John, beginning at the first verse (found on page of the New Testament portion of the pew Bibles). Listen for God's Word to you today.

[John 20:1-18]

The empty tomb did not immediately ignite faith in Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene's initial reaction was to wonder what had become of the corpse it held, causing her to conclude that someone must have taken the body of her beloved friend and teacher.

She had come to the garden cemetery before dawn to grieve alone, to begin the slow, painful process of dealing with the absence of one she deeply loved. She saw the stone rolled back, and no body inside, and her mind saw only one possible explanation. She ran to report the news to the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Without hesitation they run to check things out, but what they "believe" simply corroborates Mary's testimony: the text notes that "they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead." They knew—Mary knew—that dead bodies do not simply "disappear." Someone had to have taken it, and put it somewhere else. Logically, Mary was right on, so she turned her attention again to finding the body and getting on with her grieving.

As long as Mary remained locked in logic, to the extent that she could see only what she imagined possible, the illogical and impossible truth was hidden from her eyes. Her rational but closed world was shattered when Jesus called her name. "Mary." And a short while later she would become the first witness to the resurrection as she confidently proclaimed to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." The first Easter revealed to eyes of faith the reality beyond our human ability to comprehend; the truth that transcends flesh and blood, experience and intellect. Perhaps the most compelling proof of Jesus' resurrection may be found in the transformation of his first followers from weeping, fearful mourners to bold activists who went everywhere and told his story, shared his teaching, and engendered healing and hope to people who were sick and tired, hungry, lost, searching for a home.

In a cover story this week, Newsweek quoted the first-century historian Josephus who had observed a curious resilience among this Jewish sect. The remark is barely a footnote in his accounting of the times, but there it is: *Those who in the first place came to love Jesus did not give up their affection for him after he died so that the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.* [Newsweek, March 28, 2005] It strains the bounds of credibility to think that this tribe would have survived more than a generation without continuous dynamic experience of Christ's living presence. And so still to this day, the Christian church gathers to proclaim: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!

There is a truth stronger than death, and it is the truth of God's love.
There is a way that leads to new life, which may be found in Jesus Christ.

Friends, Easter is not natural. It defies logic, and flies in the face of any reasonable explanation. Easter is not the day we see the first robin of spring, or catch a glimpse of crocuses pushing up through the ice and snow, or feel the sunshine on our face and sigh with relief that the winter is almost over. Easter is a new day. It is the day we look at a blizzard outside and smile at the tangy tomatoes we are going to enjoy soon. Nor is Easter simply a commemoration of Jesus' resurrection so long ago. We could read the biblical narratives closely and debate the historical details endlessly, and miss the meaning of the day all together. Christ is risen....*today*. We celebrate our rising, and the new life calling us by name. Easter is the day we stand at the graveside of our beloved and see it as a labor and delivery room, bearing our loved one into new life. Easter is the day we hit the wall, come to the end of our rope, lose control ...and discover that God's love outlives and outlasts any force that threatens to destroy or hurt us. Easter is the day we stop mourning and start practicing the resurrection made possible by Christ's rising.

One year ago on Easter I spoke for the first time of an idea to buy the former Heights Presbyterian Church and convert it into a Youth Center with a Boys & Girls Club program for school aged young people. The Presbyterian Church that had once been there had shut its doors; to re-open those doors and welcome youth into a positive place seemed a good example of "resurrection." The leadership team of this church endorsed the idea, a board was formed, and plans were set in motion to raise money, secure the needed permits from the city, and build a broad base of community support. The road has not been easy. The city has severely restricted membership in the club, and reduced its hours of operation. An environmental study revealed asbestos in the plaster ceilings. A potential source of funding, the Community Development Block Grant program has been cut. Some neighbors have wondered loudly why we didn't use our own building for such a program (I guess they didn't know that we have Open Doors, another after-school program for Roxboro middle school students here Monday through Friday). I am learning to see these realities through resurrection eyes; to believe – against evidence to the contrary, in the face of those who are scornful and skeptical—that this youth center is going to rise. What died as a house of prayer, God will resurrect as house of care for the precious children and young people who need it.

A colleague of mine tells of visiting patients in a hospital's burn unit. She was particularly moved by one little boy, eight or nine years old, who had been severely burned. Though he was receiving expert care, he was not

improving; in fact in the early days of treatment, he seemed to grow weaker and less able to fight off infection. In vain, the minister tried to cheer the boy up. And then one day, as she went in to see him, there was a new light in his eyes; his talk was more animated; he laughed and joked with my friend. After the visit, she cornered a nurse, inquiring what had brought about this transformation. The nurse didn't know, but said his condition had improved remarkably following a visit from a hospital volunteer. Now more perplexed, the minister located this volunteer and demanded, "What did you do? What did you say to him to bring about this change?" The volunteer smiled and shook her head: "Nothing—nothing beyond what I always do—I'm supposed to tutor kids who will be hospitalized long-term in their school subjects. All I did was to listen to him read a little, drill him with flash cards, correct a spelling paper. But you know, about halfway through our lesson time, the little boy looked at me and said as if he were figuring it out for himself: "I'm going to be okay, aren't I? They wouldn't send a teacher to a dying boy, would they?"

---Nor would God send a savior to a dying world without some reason to hope. This hope is not denial that sticks its head in the sand rather than see the world as it really is: achingly holy and sad and terrible and beautiful. The world that includes Redfield, Minnesota, and Cleveland, Ohio, and Falluja, Iraq, and the hidden recesses of the human heart. Resurrection is for all of that, and more. Someone has said that the job of the Church on Easter is the angels' role. We stand at the mouth of an empty tomb and announce, "He is not here. He is risen. You can come in here and look around but you won't find him here. Go back to your lives--to the ragged, lovely places where you try to love and make meaning and make money and send your daughter to college and visit a grave and scream alone in the car and throw things and wonder if the dress makes you look fat, and if your children will turn out all right in the end—or if you will? ...go back there—that is where you will find the God who gives life to the dead." *[I'm indebted to my sister Sue Westfall for this quotation; apologies to the unknown author]*

Who are you looking for? Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. ALLELUIA! AMEN.

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