

The Resurrection of Our Lord 2021 B

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 4, 2021

John 20:1-18

Christ is risen. Alleluia!

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Dear Friends:

Some of you have spent a lot of time watching TV and surfing the web during this pandemic. Don't be embarrassed about it. I'm proud of it. This is the first time in my life that anyone ever said to me, "*Be a hero. Stay home and watch TV.*" So I've been doing my part.

And recently, while I was being a national hero and sitting on my couch, I saw a standup comic. And he told the story of how he had fallen in love, and he decided to ask his girlfriend's mother for permission to get married. And he said it was the best decision of his life. Because his future mother-in-law said, "Yes, and don't buy a ring!" She said, "I want her to have my mother's ring." "It's a huge diamond, it's an heirloom, and I want her to have that ring. "Don't go to the jewelry store. "Don't spend your hard earned money on a ring, because we've already got one.

So not having to pay for the ring was a huge relief, the standup comic said. The hard part, he said, The hard part was getting four guys to help him dig up grandmother's coffin. Because that's where the ring was.

And this morning, I'm sharing that story with you because at the heart of our gospel this morning is a grave that has been cracked open. A grave that is perceived to have been desecrated. There is a lost body. A stolen corpse. At the heart of our gospel this morning Mary Magdalene asserts three times that the body of Jesus has been taken, stolen, removed. Perhaps by malefactors. Perhaps by some kind of mistake. But it's striking on Easter morning that she asserts three times that the corpse of Jesus has been removed. This is in a gospel— John— in which Peter has denied Jesus three times. It's a gospel where the risen Jesus will appear to his followers in a locked room and say to them three times: "Peace be with you." (Come back next week if you want to hear that story.) This is all John's gospel where after Easter, Peter will be invited to say that he loves Jesus three times, making amends for that whole denial thing. So these things tend to happen in threes, and three times Mary Magdalene says that the body has gone missing.

I have tended to make fun of Mary Magdalene, to treat her as comic relief. She mistakes Jesus for a gardener, hahaha. The idea of graves being opened up and bodies being stolen is dark

humor. Anyone who has ever seen Mel Brooks' classic movie Young Frankenstein has probably laughed at cadavers and grave robbers. But this year, in the pandemic, I have a new appreciation for Mary Magdalene, and her three-fold testimony that the body of Jesus has been wrongfully hijacked. I'm coming to appreciate Mary as someone in the midst of trauma. As I am. And as I think most of us are, whether we are in church or outside of the church, experiencing trauma due to this pandemic.

The four gospel-writers tell these stories differently. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John differ in some of the details. They do all agree on one thing about Easter morning. There were angels at that tomb. Or at least one angel. And Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John also all agree on a second thing: Mary Magdalene was at that tomb. And they *also* all agree, earlier in the story, on Good Friday, that Mary Magdalene was a witness to the crucifixion.

I want you to take a moment and stand with Mary Magdalene. Most or all of the Twelve male disciples were in hiding while Jesus was dying on the cross. She was out there. A woman. In those days: a woman. And an out-of-towner, a Galilean, with a funny accent that people noticed. And she watched Jesus die of asphyxiation. That's what crucifixion does, that's how it kills you. Slow asphyxiation. That's what she saw. The whole thing, according to the gospel writers. From beginning to end. Even how the body was taken down and placed in a tomb.

And until recently, most of us had never seen death by asphyxiation. But now we have. In Minneapolis, during the last few weeks, it became virtually impossible to identify jurors who had not seen the video recording of the death of George Floyd. For some Americans, a repetition of the death of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014, and a repetition of the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015, and for some Americans, a repetition of even more horrifying memories. And elsewhere, Americans have seen 554,000 fatalities due to Covid, which also kills by slow asphyxiation. Many Covid deaths have been witnessed by hospital staff while family and friends and clergy have been forbidden. And there is a huge toll on these hospital workers. What Mary Magdalene witnessed was death by slow asphyxiation. And now, more of us know about that. How powerless we feel watching that unfold. We know that feeling, that trauma. Americans say that the Vietnam War was traumatic, and that it left scars that still have not healed. And here we are, approaching ten times the number of American deaths as what took place during the Vietnam War.

So on Easter morning, first thing, "while it was still dark," Mary Magdalene is approaching the tomb traumatized, shell-shocked from what she has been through. And she's trying to do the honorable things, the grief rituals, the things that mark the end of a life, the end of a relationship, the end of one of life's chapters. She's trying to do the small things that most humans do to assert some control in a powerless situation, to create some meaning in the face of tragedy and loss. And this is her frame of mind when she discovers the empty tomb. And now, women and men, I ask you: Can you stand alongside Mary in this moment? Can you connect with her loss and her trauma? I think you can. *They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.* Unspeakable loss, powerless, stripped of dignity. *They have taken away my Lord,*

and I do not know where they have laid him. You've seen the asphyxiation. Don't you and I now stand before the empty tomb, sharing all of Mary Magdalene's trauma and all of her loss? And thinking with her, "Just when I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse"?

Suddenly, in one instant, the presumed gardener, the presumed stranger who for whatever reason would steal the body of a dead Galilean peasant— suddenly, the presumed gardener speaks her name. In the voice of her teacher. His intonation, his resonance, his warmth, his familiarity. In a one word exclamation: "Mary!" And that one word, the shepherd calling his sheep by name, THAT is Easter. She was adrift, but with that one word, she was anchored. She was out of her mind, but with that one word, she was *re-minded*. (Hallelujah! What a joy to be *re-minded* when you've gone out of your mind!) She was back. And she exclaimed "*Rabbouni!*" her nickname for him, that Aramaic word blasting past the Hebrew, shooting straight through the Greek New Testament and burrowing into the English translation: *Rabbouni!*

I believe that at some point, the risen Christ will call your name. In the midst of all this trauma, I believe that you will hear him. Or see him. Or touch him. One of the things we know from the Bible is that some people can see him, but they can't touch him. Some people can hear him, but they can't see him. Some people can touch him, but they can't see him. Peter's experience is different from Mary Magdalene's experience. Thomas' experience is different from Peter's experience. Your experience will be your own. That's what the New Testament shows us over and over. Different strokes for different folks. But the risen Christ comes to us in our trauma. He comes to you in your trauma. It happens.

And that's the reason that the Church makes such a big deal. That's the reason that people get dressed in fancy Easter clothes. That's the reason that churches say *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia*. That's the reason that you dragged your grandchildren to church. (Or if you're a kid, that's the reason your grandparents dragged you to church.) That's what Easter is, that's the seed. When we are dead in our trauma and in our loss, God is present. When we are lost and confused, God is present. When we are without hope and without faith, God is present. When we are dead, God resurrects us. Because Christ died and was raised, you will be raised from your death.

I'm going to say that one more time. But before I do, this is the reason that the Church makes such a big deal at Easter. Because of Mary Magdalene. Because we all experience trauma. We are all in that story. And when we see others dying, when we see asphyxiation, it breaks us. It's trauma. We are like Mary. But because Christ died and was raised, you will be raised from your death. Like Mary. And you will join Mary and Peter and the others in their song. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. Amen.