

The Beginning of Hope

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 20:1-18

Delivered on April 16, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

It is still dark. The sun has set over a long Saturday, a Sabbath day when the world stops and no one works. No one even works for the dead. If someone dies, you'd better hurry up and bury them on a Friday, there is no work on Saturday. It is still dark, call it five in the morning, somewhere in there. Mary Magdalene has not slept in two days and she has waited for the Sabbath to be over so that she can go to the garden to be with him, probably to anoint his body with spices as was the Jewish custom. So she gets to the garden and though the sun has not yet started peaking over the horizon she can see the tomb. The moon which was full on Passover is now starting to wane, but it is still full enough to shine down and illuminate the tomb—and Mary sees that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. She doesn't peer in yet, but she can still see that his body is not there. Does she believe that the Lord is risen? No. Someone has taken the body. So she runs to Simon Peter and an unnamed disciple, and she says "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him."

So, Simon Peter and the other disciple run to see for themselves, but the other disciple outruns Peter and gets to the tomb first. He stoops down and looks in, and he sees the linen cloths that were wrapped around his body lying there, but he doesn't go in. And then, Simon Peter goes into the tomb and he also sees the linen cloths as well as the face cloth. The face cloth is not lying with the linen cloths, but it is rolled up in a place by itself. And then the other disciple, the one who stuck his head in the entrance way a moment earlier, this time comes into the tomb with Simon Peter—and he sees, and believes. But not Mary. As the disciples go back to their own homes, Mary stands outside the tomb crying; and as she cries she bends down and

finally she too looks in the tomb. As she looks in, she doesn't just see linen cloths, but this time there are two angels clothed in white. One is seated where Jesus' head was lying and one where his feet were lying. "Woman, why are you weeping?" she hears them say.

"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him"—and then she turns around—and she sees someone she thinks is the gardener.

She hears him say "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" He seems like a nice man. He works here, so maybe he knows what happened to the body.

She says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." When Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story, I love how she asks "What did Mary think she would do, have the gardener lay the body over her shoulders and pick it up all by herself?" Well, people say things like that when they haven't slept for two days—and then she hears him say something else. "Mary."

"The gardener wouldn't know my name" she must say to herself. She looks at him again. "Rabbouni," she says, which means *teacher*.

He says to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and sisters and say to them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." That sounds so much like something he would say. This is not the kind of speech a gardener would ever give. So she goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

You know one of the things that convinces me that the bible is divinely inspired is that in the stories in the bible are so realistic. Oh yes, they may contain angels and miracles, but they are as realistic as any story can be. The dramas unfold in just the way that you would expect them to unfold in real life. For what does Mary do in this story? Does she peer into an empty

tomb and instantly believe in the way we would expect her to do in some fairy tale, some work of fiction? No. She peers into the empty tomb, a tomb that had the Lord's body in it just the day before and she thinks the same thing that we would all probably think: someone has stolen the body. Then, two angels who are sitting there in the tomb speak to her and that isn't enough to give her a clue. Then, even when the risen Lord is standing right in front of her, that still isn't enough to give her a clue. She looks right at him and she thinks he's the gardener—and isn't that just like reality?

In the philosophy class I teach at Malone, we read Paul Churchland who writes "All observation occurs within some system of concepts, and our observed judgments are only as good as the conceptual framework in which they are expressed."¹ Now, what on earth does that mean? What it means is that most of the time, most of the time we don't see and then believe. We believe and then we see. Four hundred years ago, a man by the name of Galileo got in some trouble with the Catholic Church because he said the sun doesn't revolve around the earth, but the earth revolves around the sun. That goes against the bible, the Catholic Church said. The book of Joshua says that during a battle Joshua made the sun stop in the sky, and besides you can see for yourself that the sun revolves around the earth. All you have to do is look, the sun rises in the east and it sets in the west. The earth doesn't go around the sun, the sun goes around the earth. We don't see and then believe, we believe and then we see.

Some years ago, a lot of people used to say there is something wrong with people in wheelchairs. They can't have jobs because they can't get in buildings and go upstairs. People in

¹ Churchland, P. "Reality Consists of Matter." In *Classic Philosophical Questions*, edited by R. Mulvaney, 300, 14th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2009.

wheelchairs just can't do very much. People used to look at the inability of people in wheelchairs to get in buildings and go upstairs and open doors by themselves and they said "There can't be anything wrong with the buildings, there must be something wrong with people in wheelchairs." But someone else looked and said, no, there is nothing wrong with the people, there's something wrong with the buildings. So they got a law passed which would make sure every new building had elevators and ramps and automatic doors. We don't see and then believe, we believe and then we see.

You look over an open field one day and you see beautiful wildflowers of gold and orange and purple and you see the wonder of God's creation, a place where children and dogs can run and play and be free. Someone else looks at it and see nothing more than real estate to be bought up and paved over. They see money to be made and the more money that can be made, the better. We don't see and then believe, we believe and then we see.

Why didn't Mary have a clue? Why didn't she notice the Lord standing right in front of her? There's a simple answer to that question. We see what we are looking for and a risen living Lord is not what Mary was looking for. What she was looking for were things that actually happen. Bodies get stolen, gardeners wonder in and out of gardens. But people who were dead do not come back from the dead and come and address us by name saying "Mary." In Mary's mind that is something that just doesn't happen, and so that's why she didn't see it right in front of her eyes.

I have often heard people say to me, "Pastor, I wish I could have some sign that would convince me that all this stuff we say in church is true. Pastor, if I could just see the risen Christ standing before me—if I could just see a glimpse of heaven—if the Lord could even come to me

in a dream, that would be enough for me. That would be all I need, and pastor, if that could happen to me just once I would spend the rest of my life being the best Christian I could be.”

I hear that and I want to say, “Oh, really? Really?” Because in my opinion if you don’t believe now, then you’re not going to believe with the Lord standing right in front of you. If you don’t believe now, then I am convinced that if the Lord were standing right in front of you, you would say, “Well, that’s just the gardener.” Because the question for all of us is not what kind of sign we need to be convinced and to believe. That isn’t it. The question is not what sign we need, but what are we looking for. What are we looking for? Are we looking for the dead to stay dead because that’s all we’ve ever known and that’s all we’ve ever seen, or are we looking for something called hope? Are we looking for the greedy and the powerful and the corrupt and the ruthless to win in the end because that’s the way of the world and the sooner you accept it the better, or are we looking for a world where *his truth is marching on*? Are we looking for a world in which it is ashes to ashes and dust to dust, or are we looking for a world in which *when we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve first begun*? The question for us is not what sign we need, the question for us is what are we looking for? Because I am convinced that if you are looking for the dead to stay dead and death and injustice to reign that is what you will see. But if you are looking for hope, if you are looking for new life, and if you are looking for risen Lord standing among us, then that is also what you’ll see.

Today, of course, is Easter Sunday and in churches all around this town of North Canton, and even all around the world, the expectation is that church will be packed. More people will come to church today and to worship than they do on any other time of year except Christmas.

Of those who are here today in worship, I really think there are three kinds of people. There are those who are here because have never had any serious doubts that our Lord was raised that first Easter morning two thousand years ago, and they never will have any doubt—and if you asked them if they have ever had any doubts they would get a puzzled look on their face and say “Why?”

In the second group, there are those who are here just because what they’ve always done is go to church on Easter, because for them, that’s what you do on Easter Sunday. Call it tradition. That’s what they always did with their mom and dad when they were growing up, that’s what their parents did with their grandparents before them, and that’s what they now do with their own children. Then there is a third group of people. They are those who are here today not as an act of faith, or as an act of tradition but more of an act of desperation than anything else. In this world of daily struggle, daily hopelessness and daily pain, they are not sure what they believe, but they have come here today in the desperate hope that maybe this Easter, they will hear the story of the empty tomb told a little bit differently. They will hear it described a little differently, delivered a little differently, and maybe this year, *this* Easter, they will have that hope that so many other people of faith seem to have. So many Easters past they have gotten up early in the morning, and put on their best dress or their best tie, and gotten their children into the bath and combed their hair, and it hasn’t connected yet. But still, they come; they come clinging to that desperate hope. And I don’t know, maybe to some extent we are all in this third group.

If that is so, then do you hear Jesus’ question to Mary being addressed to you? “Who are you looking for? Are you looking for a gardener, or are you looking for a risen Lord? Are you

looking for a stolen body, or are you looking for hope? Are you looking for the same old triumph of power and greed and cruelty, or are you looking for the triumph of love and justice and mercy. Who are you looking for and what are you looking for?