

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
17 April 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Easter Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Christ on the Loose”

First Sermon in the Easter Series: *A Moveable Feast*

John 20:1-18

New Revised Standard Version

“I have seen the Lord!” Mary Magdalene proclaims.

Easter is always a necessary reminder that the proclamation of the Good News does not happen without the voices that proclaim it.

But. If you feel like you’ve lost your voice when it comes to Easter Hope, that’s understandable. The daily barrage of bad news in the world can easily give us Laryngitis when it comes to sharing the Good News of our God. But maybe today, we can get our voices back.

Thanks be to God for Mary Magdalene, who while at first ran away from what was clearly a disturbing burial site of her Lord, she then came back – with friends – and they checked it out again together. Each having their own experience of the empty tomb. And they didn’t have some mystical resurrection revelation. The only that that

was clear was that Jesus was not only dead, but now his body was missing too. A double whammy of grief. And while the two men return home – no doubt bewildered and befuddled, Mary remains at the tomb weeping. And it’s only in her lingering a little longer, and in her grieving at the grave, that through her tears, she sees the angels. When they ask her why she’s weeping she states the party line of the whole morning, the only truth she knows at this point: *“they have taken away my Lord and I do not know here they have laid him,”* (vs 13). Her grief and her desperation suggest that she in no way is thinking about resurrection or miracles. Only loss upon loss.

And then as John tells the story, when Mary turns around to see a man who she thinks is a gardener, she begs him – with a hint of accusation – *“Sir, if YOU have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him...”* (vs 15)...revealing that

she still thinks is a grave robbery – a crime scene to decode, a mystery to be solved.

Time and time again in this story, Mary's only thought of the empty tomb is that Jesus' physical body has been removed stolen, robbed. You know how it is when you are grieving. Grief grips so tightly you don't have room to embrace much of anyone or anything else. As loss lingers it leaves little room for curiosity. And trauma traps you in cycles of thinking and believing that are very hard to escape. So of course all Mary can think about is that the one she loves is gone.

It's only when the man she supposes to be the gardener says her name, "Mary," that she snaps out of her grief and her foregone conclusion of grave robbery. She responds, with immediate recognition, "*Rabbouni*," (teacher). (*snap*) Just like that – Mary sees Jesus. You see on Easter, an empty tomb is not enough, it takes a personal encounter with the living Christ for Mary to snap out of her fog of grief and realize that something has come alive again – in her, and ultimately in our world.

It is not the silence or the absence of Jesus in the tomb that moves Mary from grief to recognition; it's the presence of the Risen Christ that calls her name out loud. Perhaps this means that faith is less about what we cannot see or fail to comprehend or what we feel like is "missing," and more about what IS present...what we CAN see and hear in the encounters around us.

If Mary's story is an example for us, then you don't have to grasp the concept of the resurrection to recognize that the voice calling your name has the Hope you need to hear. The realization of resurrection takes time. The recognition of the living Christ in our midst takes time. But even more than time – it takes letting go, when all we want to do is hold on. Letting go of what we think should be true our lives or our faith or how we think Jesus should show up in our lives – in order to be free enough to embrace what is right before and us and beside us. And it takes raising our voices, even when we're not sure what to say. Mary doesn't see Jesus magically rise up out of a tomb...coming back to life. She just hears him speak her name into the emptiness of her loss. It feels like a quiet moment of

relief more than a grand miracle of resurrection.

And we can infer from John's text that Mary must have run to embrace Jesus because of what Jesus says, "*Do not hold on to me,*" (vs 17). You'd think that after the painful week of suffering and crucifixion he's had, Jesus would be desperate for a touch that was not torture. But it seems his comment isn't about the embrace itself, but the emotion behind it. The disciples, and I'm sure that included Mary, always wanted to keep Jesus near to the proximity of THEIR experience. But Jesus has always been kinda hard to get a hold of, hasn't he?

"Even when Jesus was 12 and visited the temple in Jerusalem with his parents, he slipped through their [grasp] and they had to go search for him. And, then [as an adult], when you expected him to be in the temple teaching, he might just as surely [find him] out in the desert praying or on a hillside [feeding thousands], or hanging out with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners on the wrong side of town, [or walking on water,

or talking with a woman at a well in Samaria, or riding on a donkey into Jerusalem]."¹

"It was always hard to figure where he might turn up next. All Easter does is make it that way for all [of] eternity."² Christ is on the loose now. The divine will be in disguise...maybe as a gardener, or maybe as you! He could be anyone, anywhere. There's is no pinning him down, no getting a handle on him, no holding him back. He's like a firefly on a warm summer night,"³ as my mentor George Mason says.

We call them lightening bugs in Texas. But you know the creatures. Their lights blink on and off in the night sky. And as kids you couldn't just sit back and enjoy watching them flutter and flick about. No, you'd chase them around and try to catch them in jars, but the minute you catch one to keep it close, the minute it'd begin to die, and would its light. The lightening bug lost all its luster the minute you tried to capture it or control it. Well, it's the same with Jesus.⁴

¹ Rev. Dr. George Mason, "Christ on the Loose," *Day1.org* (27 March 2005), accessed on April 17, 2022 at https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025eb/christ_on_the_loose.

² Mason, *ibid.*

³ Mason, *ibid.*

⁴ Mason, *ibid.*

The harder we try to capture and hold on to Jesus, to keep him within our watch for when we need him next, the more we keep him within the pages of Scripture or the annals of history, the more we keep his light from shining all around and about. The Risen Christ wants to shine everywhere and for everyone – not just for us.

“Every time we think we have a hold of Jesus [in our jar of safe-keeping], he won't stay long because he has places he wants to take us, people he wants us to meet. Jesus is free of the grave and roaming at large in the world now. He will not be confined again. He is on the loose, and we have to track him like a firefly, watch for his flickering light. But he's not just on the loose from us, avoiding intimacy, a God afraid of commitment, [or being close to us.] He is on the loose in order to loose us from every grave we find ourselves in.”⁵ He's on the loose to turn our attention away from empty tombs and towards encounters of transformation.

And sometimes the tombs that take our attention aren't so obvious to us. We can find ourselves staring into a tomb,

stuck in one moment, without realizing how long we've been standing in front of that tomb getting nowhere. We can limit ourselves in so many ways by where we stand weeping, and what we desperately want to cling to. This is especially true when it comes to our beliefs about the way things are and how the world should work.

How often do we stand looking at tombs, all the while missing the presence of the one who could help us, heal us, and free us? Because that's the thing about Christ – when he's on the loose – he's gonna show up in the people and places we least expect.

And boy do I have a story for you about this!

Some of you know that Damon and I lost our luggage on our April 1st trip home from Sevilla, Spain. Or – I should say – the airlines lost our luggage. We didn't. No big deal. Lost luggage happens all the time. Surely we'll get it soon enough. We just need to file a claim.

I don't have time to go into the details of this story – or saga really – except to say that the

⁵ Mason, *ibid.*

airline we booked our tickets on said they could not help us file a claim. The airline that we checked our bags with in Sevilla said they could not help us file a claim. And the airline that we flew home on for the last leg of our flight said THEY could not help us file a claim. All three airlines – supposedly part of One “Network” – could not help us. This was maddening; it had us going in circles following the direction of wherever the last finger pointed. We’ve spent hours at DIA. Hours on the phone; trust us – we’ve tried everything.

We were staring at an empty tomb y’all. Getting nowhere! Until we noticed a United Airlines woman who didn’t have a line. United Airlines is NOT one of the aforementioned airlines by the way. She did not represent any of our airlines, but something told us to just talk to her anyway...to go out on a limb and if she could help us figure out what to do. And just like that – (snap) – the following of that absurd inkling that made no rationale sense given how you are supposed to handle things at the airport, this whole story changed into one worth telling on Easter.

Shout out to Stephanie with

United Airlines, who helped us not just one time but MULTIPLE times. She not only located our bags for us on April 3, but again on April 14 when we had continued to make no headway with our airlines. Why she could see our bags on their worldwide tracker and our airlines could not is a mystery still today. But she helped us – and got us the names and information we needed to keep taking that one next step.

Stephanie was able to see that our bags were in Munich?!?!?, so she sent us to Eddie at Lufthansa at DIA. (Again, our flights/bags/booking had NOTHING to do with Lufthansa). But if Stephanie said go to Eddie, we were gonna go to Eddie. Damon spent hours waiting to speak to Eddie – but speak to him he did. And while he initially said I can’t help you – you didn’t fly with us, long story short, Damon persisted and said, “look man, you’re the ONLY hope we’ve got – can you just *try*?” And so Eddie tried. He put in our bag tag information and all our flight information – and lo and behold it worked! We actually got a claim number, a file reference number for our lost baggage.

Truth is, Damon and I had long given up hope on seeing our bags again – we really just wanted the file reference number so we could eventually file with our travel insurance and try to get some money to help replace some items from our baggage.

But we got way more than just the file reference number. We got hope that our bags might still be out there...but even more, we were shown compassion and care. Which is all we really needed in this whole fiasco. A little understanding. Someone willing to listen.

Long story short, through that tracker Eddie could see that our bags had gone from Madrid to Munich to Frankfurt and now they were in Florence. Why? How? Who knows. (We didn't fly to any of those places except Madrid). But at least we could see that our bags were sitting in Italy.

And I kid you not – at 3:30 in the morning on Saturday – my phone rings – so loudly it wakes both of us up – and it's some chipper Italian guy calling from the airport in Florence. He asks if we are the Scalfaros. (Yes) If we have missing bags. (Um,

YES!) And if we live in Denver (Yes, Yes, and YES!). And without skipping a beat he says – *“Great! We'll send your bags to Denver. They go to Frankfurt, then to Denver, Arrive Sunday. Goodbye!”*

I would have thought it was a dream if not for the call log on our phone that I could check the next morning. Sure enough when we checked our tracker, we could see the bags were indeed on our way to Denver by the route he indicated – and are – fingers crossed – supposed to arrive today. (Easter miracle!) Of course, we'll believe it when we see it...but regardless of whether our bags show up or not – here is the Easter good news: When you turn away from the Tomb that is Empty...it frees you to discover the encounters that might just be transforming.

All of the help we received with this somewhat distressing and frustrating situation has been through an airline network that we didn't even fly on. We never paid them a dime. We never were on any of their flights. They never were supposed to see our bags. We booked and flew with a completely different airline group. There is no reason we should have talked to them, there is no reason they should

have helped us, but the Risen Christ doesn't operate with reason and nor does he look like what we expect he might look like or operate in the systems status quo.

We just stopped in that competitor's airline office on a whim...something (the Spirit maybe?) pulled us to just ask someone outside the circle of responsibility and relationships we thought we had to stay in.

It turns out in this situation, our assumptions about who could help us were all wrong. It turns out the people who are supposed to help you often don't. And, truly, that anyone can help anyone if they care. And if you are persistent and not afraid to ask for help. Even if you think they won't be able to help you - you never know who has the help you need or the resources you need. Hope is often in the places we'd never think to look.

But this whole experience has made me reflect on all the people in my life who I think I have no power to help. But who I probably do. Stephanie and Eddie were our gardeners. And I wonder, whose gardener am I? Whose attention might I be able to direct away from an empty

tomb and into an encounter that might just be transformational?

Who know that Christ is on the loose in the airlines that you didn't even fly.

So often our ability to see the Risen Christ in our midst – to find hope or healing or a helping hand – requires us to let go of our comfort zones or even our preconceived ways of thinking about how the world is supposed to work. There must be so much hope and healing and help around me that I have missed – throughout my life – because I have failed to think outside the box – because I've spent more time staring at tombs than talking to gardeners – or because I've been taught that there is a certain pathway towards getting an answer or the outcome you need – when the reality is – while the world certainly is stuck in its ways at times (because we humans are stuck in our ways) – there are plenty of people in divine disguise who will step up to help, heal, and give hope – we just have to see them and ask.

Sometimes we have to stop staring at the empty tombs to discover the encounter with the Living Christ. And sometimes, we are the gardener – the divine

in disguise. We are the hope for someone else. We're not always locked into the tombs we think we are.

I know for myself, I'm so quick to assume that if something is out of my immediate experience or knowledge range that I should point them to someone else. I'm quick to say, "I'm not the one who can help." But Stephanie and Eddie – they didn't say that; they stayed in with us. When they knew they were the only hope we had, they stepped up and showed up. Big time.

If Christ is on the loose in the world than that means the divine can be disguised as you or me on any given day, in any given moment. And we may just be the only hope someone's got.

Of course this is a story about luggage, but here's one about much more precious cargo – refugee children from Ukraine.

Even when all we hear on the news are bombings and killings and horrific tragedy in Ukraine, I was reminded by our bus driver in Spain, that Christ is on the loose. Through actions big and small, and through everyday, ordinary people.

Before our trip, our bus driver Jose Manuel, had volunteered to drive his bus from Spain to the border of Ukraine in Poland and pick up refugee children, many with special needs. He showed us pictures and told us stories – proving that while enemy forces oppress and kill and that tragedy is worth grieving for and fighting against – it is also imperative that we remember that Christ is on the loose in the world through us – through people like Jose Manuel. We cannot stop believing in the power of our humanity – our deepest heart places of compassion – to rise up in the face of imminent danger and despite all odds – to bring life. Jose Manuel could not stop the death that took the parents of the children he was driving in his bus. But he could ensure that they had a chance at life.

Still today, Christ is on the loose somewhere on the roads between Ukraine and Spain as Jose Manuel and his colleagues shuttle refugees from danger to safety.

And there are countless other stories of how we show up as gardeners to one another. On this Easter may we help each other turn from Tombs to Testimony...from asking

“Where is the Lord?” to
proclaiming “I have seen the
Lord!”

Because the Lord is out there to
be seen, even in death and
destruction, Christ is still on the
loose. Just because there is evil
in the world, doesn’t mean
Christ is not rising up from the
ashes – alive and at work in the
places where there appears to be
only death.

“Christ is on the loose! [There’s
no] telling what he is up to next,
but know this for sure: He not
only knows Mary’s name; he
knows your name, too.”⁶ And
when you hear your name, be
ready to respond. Be ready to let
go, and let loose, be ready to
rise to the occasion and
proclaim, “I have seen the
Lord!” in You and You and You
and You!

This Easter, let’s turn from
Tombs to Testimonies. For the
world needs the Good News,
and if we don’t proclaim it, who
will?

Amen.

⁶ Mason, *ibid.*