

“Encountering Jesus: Finding Ourselves”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: March 31, 2024



I do want to welcome you to worship on this Easter Sunday.

[Whether you are in person – joining us through our television ministry on WAXN Channel 64 – or streaming online...] it is a gift for us to be together on this day when we celebrate the event that transforms our lives and our world – the promise that informs our hope – and the freedom that gives us courage.

You have heard me tell the children of the church about our offering today – 100% of which will go to support a 52-unit affordable housing development across the street from Westerly Hills Elementary School. We have been partners with Westerly Hills for 24 years and believe God is calling us to continue to invest in that neighborhood and those neighbors. Today’s offering is a next step in our commitment to reflect the light of Christ to the people who we are called to serve.

I would encourage you to look at what is coming up at First Pres by noting announcements in the bulletin and by scrolling our website. In front of you in the pew (and on the website) there is something called a Connect Card. If you see something you are interested in plugging into, let us know about it via these cards and drop it in the offering plate or submit it online. On the back of that card is a place for you to let us know of any prayer requests you have – if you drop those in the plate or submit them online, they will come to the pastors.

Turning now to Scripture...today we are reading the Easter story from the gospel of John. On the Sundays that led up to Easter we have been hearing about different people’s encounters with Jesus in John’s gospel. When Jesus was crucified, it seemed as though those encounters were over. They weren’t.

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Each of the four gospels tells the story of the first Easter morning. This is how John’s gospel tells it. I am reading from the 20th chapter:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

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But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, 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? Whom 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, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said all these things to her.

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Have you ever had someone throw a surprise party for you?

Maybe it was for a promotion at work, or a retirement, or an accomplishment?

More years ago than I want to admit my bride conspired to throw me a surprise party for my 40th birthday. She had figured out a way to get some of our closest friends – including my sister – to meet at my parent’s house in the mountains where she had arranged for chef to cook us a meal. The night was exactly what I wanted – low-key with food, and drink, and old stories, and plenty of laughter with my people. It was a night I continue to treasure.

But – to be honest – the surprise part was kind of hard.

I don’t think it was hard for my wife to **keep** the surprise.

What was hard was knowing how to **react** to the surprise.

Knowing me well, my wife anticipated that...as someone with a proclivity to some control issues...it might be good to give me the slightest heads’ up. Even so, walking into the “surprise” was unnerving.

What should I say?

How should I react?

What should I do with my hands??

In the surprise parties I have attended – there are a variety of reactions when the guest of honor walks through the door: sometimes they laugh, sometimes they jump out of shock, sometimes they cry because they

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are overwhelmed, sometimes they glare at the person who tricked them into being surprised, sometimes they crumple to the ground.

By definition – a surprise is a surprise because it is not what people expect.

And if you’ve been a human long enough, you know there’s no one way to react when we are faced with what we don’t expect.

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For the people who were closest to Jesus, they had already learned something about the ways that he was challenging certain expectations.

The disciples – including men and women – had witnessed Jesus teaching crowds, sparring with the muckity mucks of organized religion, and having one-off engagements with people who everyone else ignored. It was clear from his teaching that Jesus wanted to invite his followers into a different way of being human – one that was untethered from the idea that we only exist as a means to someone else’s end...or that we are helpless and without agency...or that we have to accept the labels that others put on us for the sake of control.

If you have been in worship over the past couple of months, these are the stories we have been working through in John’s gospel – about ways that people encounter Jesus and learn to make courage, and purpose, and identity, and hope, and truth more authentically human. If you haven’t been in worship over the past couple of months, I just covered seven or eight sermons in an elevator speech...so you’re welcome ;).

When it comes to Easter – and the news of resurrection – the encounter with Jesus is different. Categorically so. The news of Easter morning is not a class that can be taught. It’s not a parable that gets explained.

Easter is a shift. It is a revelation. It is a disruption. It is a surprise.

There are two things I want to point out about the way the gospel of John tells us the story of this first Easter.

The first is to notice that resurrection happens in the midst of trauma.

That might sound obvious – you know the story, you know *why* Jesus was in the tomb...it was because three days previous he had been executed on the cross after being betrayed, denied, tried, and convicted. The one who was supposed to be the Messiah had died.

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On that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene was up at dark...head-spinning...trying to make sense out of what had happened and not being able to...because she had suffered the trauma of grief. And if you have been there, you know that kind of aimlessness. You know that kind of shock.

It is important for us to remember that resurrection happened when things seemed lost, and broken, and hopeless – not when life was grand, full of sunshine and rainbows, and care-free.

If we want to see where God is at work – where the risen Christ shows up – where the hope of resurrection springs up...it is precisely in the moments when we feel like life is falling apart and where our minds can no longer make sense of things. That is how Easter started – and it is how Easter continues to manifest itself in our world.

The second thing I want us to notice about that first Easter morning is that the people who encountered the surprise of the moment were a total mess.

Honestly, it is almost comical. Mary finds the stone rolled back from the tomb and she freaks out and runs away. She tells Peter and the Beloved disciple and they run...actually, race. The Beloved Disciple gets to the tomb first. *“Do I go in? Do I stay out? Do I go in? Do I stay out? And what do I do with my hands??”*

Peter runs headlong into the tomb without asking any questions. Just charges in...*ready, fire, aim.* Then...Peter and the Beloved disciple look at each other, *“Oh well...that was nice.”* And then they went back home.

Mary stays and just cries. In fact – she is so overwhelmed by the mixture of trauma and grief and dismay and questions – that she doesn’t even recognize the risen Christ until he calls her by name. And then she worships him and goes to spread the news.

This week – as I’ve considered what to stand here and say to you about this familiar story – and what to share about the significance of what God did through raising Jesus from death to life – I can’t help but wonder if, over the years, we’ve turned Easter from a surprise that is meant to be experienced into an event that people like me think we need to explain.

What I hope you see is that in the face of something that only God could do – the reaction of those who experienced resurrection was just so deliciously human. So quirky...and awkward...and incomplete.

In some respects, I worry that...historically...we’ve spent too much time defining Easter for you by trying to tell you **what it means**, and what that means you **need to think**, and how that means you **need to act**. I can

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Imagine that sometimes that has left you in the place of thinking that Easter isn't about you – or isn't for you – if you had thoughts or reactions that didn't align with the way Easter had been defined.

So here is what I want to say: If the news of resurrection confuses you a little – that's okay. If the thought of a God who can raise Jesus from the dead raises questions for you – you're in good company. If the reflecting on resurrection opens doors in your mind that were previously closed – great. If resurrection can help you believe past the things you didn't think could ever change – terrific. If resurrection doesn't compute with your analytical mind – you don't have to pretend that you get it.

There is no, one, right, way to react to God doing something as radically different and transformative as Easter.

And – not to burst anyone's bubble – what God accomplished by breaking death's dominion through resurrection power doesn't depend on our reaction anyway.

But it is something that **God did for us**...and, more than us, for the world.

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Early on that first Easter morning, when Mary was still riding waves of grief and up before the dawn, she discovered that the world had changed. The stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. *Surprise!*

Later, still disoriented and confused, she bumped into the risen Christ in the garden. *Surprise!*

What gladdens my heart on this Easter morning is that today:

A grieving wife shows up in this place because the promise of resurrection tethers her grief to the hope of life eternal.

A couple weary, but committed, to the journey of infertility treatments show up in this place because the promise of resurrection gives strength.

Family members whose relationship is strained show up in this place because the promise of resurrection creates room for their reconciliation.

People overwhelmed by news of war and conflict show up in this place because the promise of resurrection comes with the promise of peace.

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People who you might think would just give into the pressure and cynicism of this world show up in this place because the promise of resurrection helps them frame this world differently.

My friends – we can't really control what our reaction will be to the news that got us out of bed and all dressed up to come to church and celebrate this morning.

All I can promise is that if we think our encounters with a God of resurrection are over – or that things in our lives or our world are so broken that they are without hope...***surprise!***

Because Christ is risen.

He is risen, indeed.

Alleluia. Amen.