

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mt 28.1—10; Mk 16.1—8; Lk 24.1—12)

20 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.² 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.”³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^a into the tomb;¹² 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^b “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ 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.’ ”¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.¹

^a Gk lacks *to look*

^b That is, *Aramaic*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Gradual Perception, Present Tense, Eyes Above

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 20:1-18

Easter morning 1980. Exactly 25 years ago. It was the first Easter after I had heard a call to the ordained ministry. I had in my possession a letter of acceptance from Harvard Divinity School. I had just notified the company of which I was a vice-president that I was resigning my post in the mid-summer, and that I was selling our house and moving our family to Boston. I came to this first Easter after feeling God's presence in my life in this intense way sure of one thing: this Easter would be just incredible. I would experience the resurrection like never before. And I planned to give it every chance to be like an explosion of fireworks.

I convinced my brother Jeff to go with me for the sunrise service. But this wasn't just an ordinary sunrise service. It was at the Cathedral of Pines in Rindge, New Hampshire. Let me give you some important facts. Rindge was over an hour away. Also, the sunrise service was a really at sunrise, not at a more humane time like ours at 7:30. And the service didn't begin at sunrise. The service actually ended at sunrise. It began well before sunrise, in the dark. All of that added together meant that we left home for Rindge at 3:30 that morning. What a good sport my brother was!

So there we were in the New Hampshire woods at 4:45 in the morning on a damp, cold, pitch dark night in the early spring. But we were not alone. We had arrived at a veritable village of like nocturnal pilgrims. The great field that functioned as a parking lot at the cathedral was full. Many had come in campers and stayed the night. Others had arrived even before we did. In all there were several hundred of the faithful identified only by the beams from their flashlights. Swarms of lights bounced up the path, like so many overgrown fireflies.

The Cathedral of the Pines is not a building. The sanctuary is actually the open ground under a canopy of pine trees in the southern New Hampshire mountains. The pulpit is a stone structure at the very edge of a precipice. So, as you stand in the Cathedral and face the pulpit you take in a panoramic vista of intersecting ridges. The mountains braid themselves like great loaves of challah. But, of course, this particular morning this views was from memory, from other trips to the Cathedral, for it was now still night.

The service began. The whole thing took place in the darkness. We needed flashlights to read the bulletin. The service itself was precisely timed and orchestrated. Everything, including the sermon was assigned exact fractions of the clock. All this control of the seconds was designed to maximize the effect of the awesome surroundings and the meaning of Easter. Exactly, absolutely precisely during the last verse of the last hymn, the sun edged over the eastern mountains. It burst forth in a magnificent display of resurrection light. The living beauty of God's creation was unmistakable. And on this particular Easter the display was especially spectacular. The morning was brilliantly clear. The appearance of the sun's rising light was sharp and sudden. Shining dawn overcame dark night in the course of one verse of singing. The mountains were suddenly visible. It was gorgeous. Who could witness it and then doubt that the

creator of this panorama was the author of eternal life?

As the end approached I had girded myself for emotions that I knew would overpower me and send waves of vertigo rushing over me. I stood there. I watched the sun break the mountains on cue. I readied myself. I held on to a tree for balance. And then that was it. A beautiful and beautifully orchestrated sunrise. It was spectacular. But nothing special happened inside of me.

I couldn't believe it. Where were the skyrockets? Where was the rush of dizziness? Where were the tears of joy? Where was the experience of Easter morning that I had anticipated so much? No, where was the Easter I had so carefully staged to be overwhelming? I was there holding on to a tree like a fool, and nothing much else was going on at all. I wondered about my call to ministry. I found myself whispering to myself the statement Jack Nicholson made in the title line of the old film, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

I drove the hour and more home in the quiet dawn of Easter 1980. I spoke hardly a word to my brother. Instead, I found myself flipping from radio channel to radio channel hoping that one of the radio preachers might summon up for me the awe of Easter I had somehow misplaced. It never happened. I arrived home tired, disappointed and more than a little worried about my fitness for the vocation to which I had committed myself.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation like that? Have you ever found yourself wondering about your faith? Have you ever found yourself thinking that if it were real, it would feel stronger and more certain? Have you ever found yourself praying to God, and not sure anyone was listening, or found yourself wondering why you couldn't hear any answers? Have you ever put all the Easter plans in place—new clothes, bright flowers, trumpets and alleluias in church, the big ham dinner—have you ever put it all in place and at the end of the day found that all you felt was a lot of exhaustion and precious little exhilaration?

If you've ever felt like that, then I'm here to tell you that you are in good company. And I don't mean that the good company you are in is me. I mean the good company you are in is the cast of characters in the Easter story itself. Easter in the church is a little confusing. Easter in the church is a celebration of the endpoint of the story, a celebration of faith in its final destination. When we celebrate Easter, in a sense we are always ahead of ourselves, for our celebration of Easter points to where most of us are trying to get to rather than the place where we are. The celebration of Easter is the celebration of the point of the story, but the story itself tells us that it took Jesus' followers a while to get the point. And ought not we be satisfied to be in their company and travel their path?

In John's version of Easter, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, finds the stone moved, and goes and tells two disciples that someone has taken Jesus' body. The two disciples come and look in. The one whom Jesus loved apparently gets something of a glimpse of what's going on; it says he believed. But he apparently doesn't believe very much, for the text says, "[A]s yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes." Mary then returns to the tomb. She weeps in mourning. She sees angels, but still thinks someone stole Jesus' body. And then Jesus himself speaks to her. She thinks he's the gardener and repeats her worry that someone has taken the body. Finally, when Jesus calls her by name, Mary, she recognizes him, and gratefully calls out to her teacher, "Rabbouni."

The Bible was written long before the printing press and before you could buy paper by

the ream at Staples. Writing space was precious. The Bible almost always tells its stories with a precise economy. There are few wasted words, and the words that are there are there for a purpose. So far there are a large number of verses dedicated to telling how Jesus' closest followers didn't get the picture of Easter. The emphasis isn't accidental. In the Biblical story of Easter there are no trumpets and lilies, no shepherds running across the winter fields as at Christmas, no wise men following the star for hundreds of miles. There are instead Mary Magdalene and two disciples who are only gradually awakening to the meaning of the story. It is a gradual perception for them, and I suppose it is for most of us, too. Easter realization didn't and still doesn't blast on to the scene.

And why is that? Why were Mary and the disciples slow to understand? Why do we, even when we try hard, often find the joy of it all elusive? Are we and the rest of Jesus' followers just a little dense? No, there's more to it than that.

Mary Magdalene was relieved when she recognized Jesus. She thought he was the gardener, but then he addresses her. It is such a tender moment, when he calls her by name, Mary, and she sighs in response, Rabbouni. But the relief is barely off Mary's lips when Jesus signals that it's not about what she thinks it is.

Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me." What a curious thing to say. What on earth does he mean? Jesus means two things when he tells Mary not to hold on to her. Mary thought she had Jesus back. When in relief she says, "Rabbouni," she means, "O thank goodness, we can actually have him back." Mary believed that, like the stone at the tomb, all of the events of the last week were simply rolled away, as if they never happened. When Jesus spoke to her, it was clear to her that Jesus had reversed the crucifixion. Mary interpreted that to mean that the hopes and dreams she and the other followers had had all along were vindicated. She thought, "He's back. We can go on with the life with him." Mary was focused on getting back what had been lost, but Jesus was trying to get her out of the past. He was trying to tell her that something new was beginning. It's why Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first. It was a new day, and Mary was looking for the old day. "Do not hold on to me," he said. Do not hold on to what you think I am. Do not hold on to the hopes and dreams of the past. Do not hold on to the comfortable and familiar. It's a new day. Join me in it. Come into this present moment. Do not hang on to the past.

When Jesus tells Mary not to hold on to him, he continues the sentence, "because I have not yet ascended to the Father." I have not yet ascended to the Father. Here we have arrived at the fulcrum of the story, and it has been the source of no little confusion in Christian history. When most Christians think of heaven and earth, they usually mean that on earth we have a short stay, after which comes eternity. If we've been good enough, we go through the pearly gates to a life of eternal bliss. If not, well you know where we go then. Jesus says, "I have not yet ascended to the Father," and our mind jumps immediately to thinking, okay, Jesus is saying that he is going to ascend to heaven.

In the Gospel of John Jesus makes an interesting distinction that seems to support our thinking. He says that he and his followers are in the world. But he goes to great pains to say that neither he nor his followers belong to the world. Their essential being is not of the world. Jesus and his followers are not of the world. They are of somewhere else. Doesn't that mean that Jesus and his followers are of heaven, not of earth, that they belong to heaven and not to earth?

Well, that's how the Greeks thought about it, but it's very unlikely that Jesus himself, or any other Biblical character would have. Remember, the Bible Jesus read said that when God finished a day in creation, God looked at it and saw that it was good. For Jesus, creation was not something corrupt we escape from into eternity. We get that much more from Plato than we do from Jesus.

So, what is Jesus talking about, and what relevance does it have for us this Easter morning. For Jesus creation, the world as it was created, was good. But somehow human beings got things off-track. Early in the Gospel of John we hear Jesus say those words we read at the end of the Tenebrae service, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Somehow the world got off track and people came love the darkness. But God has not given up on the world. For Jesus says in the same breath, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

When Jesus says that he and his followers are not of the world, he means that they are not essentially made up of the darkness. He means that human darkness is not their DNA. He means that the world and we are worth saving, irrespective of the darkness to which we have sunk. Like the Lord's Prayer says, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So, Jesus isn't talking about heaven as an escape from the world. But what he is talking about is changing the world's love for darkness. And Jesus knows that the only way for that to happen, the only way for people to change the direction in which they look.

Mary Magdalene, like the others, was looking at the past. She and they were looking for Jesus to save the world on the world's own terms. She was thrilled to apparently have Jesus back to do that. But he said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not ascended to the Father. Go and tell the others I am ascending." Jesus pointed them all to look above, not to the world's dark values to see where the real future of the world lay. Like Jesus told Nicodemus, we are to born from above, and being born from above we can be part of the coming of God's kingdom and will being done on earth as in heaven.

Back in 1980 at the Cathedral of the Pines, my mistake was to expect too much and too little. I expected too much when I expected the experience of the sunrise to transport me out of the mundaneness of my daily existence into heavenly skyrockets. But even worse, I expected too little when I didn't quite grasp that Easter sunrise was not meant to delight me, but to transform me. Like Mary, I had wanted an easy and comforting Easter. And like her I was given something less, and also something much more. Thanks be to God. Amen.