

Easter Sunday April 8, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Dead or Alive?

John 20:1-18

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In 1964, Pulitzer prize-winning author, John Updike, who was a faithful Episcopalian, published this poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter" (*Telephone Poles and Other Poems*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1974). This is what he writes:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
It was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the
molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His Flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
The same valved heart
that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-maché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,

make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen,
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

"Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, side-stepping transcendence, making of the event a parable – a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages."!!

How easy it is. All too easy. How easy it is to think that we know better than people of earlier ages that we are more sophisticated, that we are more rational. That we are more *legitimately* skeptical than those who lived hundreds, let alone thousands of years ago. But even though the idea is commonplace, even though we hear it on the radio or see it on the television or on the big screen, or read it in books or in literature or in the papers, that we are the first generation to have the right to be sophisticated doubters – even though this is commonplace, it simply does not have the backing of history.

Go back 2500 years, 2500 years. Look at the book of Psalms in the Bible, how the psalmists inveigh to God against those, yes, in their day and age do not believe that there is a God – who simply do not believe that there is a God – 2500 years ago.

Or go back to the time of Jesus, 2000 years ago. Read the first century Jewish historian Josephus: not a Christian. Read him describing the religious leaders in the temple in Jerusalem, the Sadducees, as those who believed in God but did not believe a wit about life after death. No such thing to them; no such thing at all.

So the idea, the idea that Jesus rose again that first Easter not in the flesh, but only in the ignorant hopes of a credulous age is not, *is not*, an idea that we are duty bound to believe in, as those who want to be (and surely we do!) full participants in the 21st Century – this modern or post-modern age in which we live.

But to draw this conclusion about ancient and modern days and people as a whole, is, I admit, by no means to rule out the possibility that individual people were just as gullible in the 1st Century as they are today! Not that the age itself was more gullible, but just that there were probably just as many gullible people then as now . . . and there surely are plenty of gullible people now!! There always have been and there always will be those who desperately want to believe something to be true that is not true, and believe it with such a passion

that to them, at least, it becomes true. And perhaps, perhaps, perhaps Jesus' followers were among them, though, even here I believe the evidence is clear that the followers of Jesus that we know about, well they didn't belong to this group.

In fact nothing, nothing was more unlikely to them, nothing was more unexpected to them, nothing was more unanticipated to the followers of Jesus that we know about than the coming back to life again of Jesus from the dead. Nothing was more unlikely to them than the resurrection. And especially on that first Easter Sunday morning. Nothing was more unlikely.

It was only just a few short hours before that – we think of three days, on the third day – but this is Jewish reckoning: Friday, Saturday, Sunday – in fact it amounts to nothing much more than 36 or 40 hours. It was just a few short hours ago that they had seen their Jesus tortured to death on a cross. They were desolate. They were depressed. They were helpless. Their hopes had been decimated. They were scared. They were crushed. The very last thing they were capable of in those hours was to create a myth about the triumphant return of Jesus, a myth or story by which and for which they could live in the next few weeks, in the next few months, the next few years and the next few decades – for which they could live . . . and die. Nothing is more unreasonable than that. This was the last thing, I mean the very last thing, that they would have imagined.

It was certainly the last thing that Mary Magdalene expected when she arrived on that first Easter Sunday morning at the tomb in which she had seen her crucified-dead-Jesus buried.

From what we know of Mary, Mary had first met Jesus near her home in a town called Magdala on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee about 70-80 miles or so from the city of Jerusalem. She had met him in a time in her life when she had been tormented by numerous problems (see Luke 8:2). But just as Jesus had touched the lives of many others, transformed their lives, so he touched and transformed her life and brought to her a sense of unity and peace that she had not known. As one person said, "Bringing together the scattered forces of her soul." (And don't we, too, in our age as in their age, desperately need the help of God to bring together the scattered forces of our souls?). Well knowing what Jesus had done, she became a follower. She joined the large crowd. Then she joined the smaller crowd, the inner circle, "the twelve," as part of a group of women (Jesus' mother, Mary among them), who accompanied the twelve wherever they went.

She joined them spiritually, and joined them physically as they traveled down from Galilee in the north all the way down to Jerusalem for that last fated time. She was there. She was one of those who were there on that first Palm Sunday as Jesus went triumphantly into Jerusalem. She was there when he was arrested. She was there when he was crucified. She was there at the foot of the

cross even though others fled. She was there when he died. She was there when his body was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb she was there.

And she was there again on the third day at that same tomb. And the story that we read in the 20th Chapter of John says that she was there *precisely*, I mean, precisely she was there again because she believed that Jesus was dead: she was there to anoint his body in his death! That's why she was there, looking for his lifeless body, seeking to care for him in death as he had cared for her in life.

No one could have been more surprised. John's gospel puts it like this (20:1-2)

"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've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid Him."

An empty tomb. No body in sight. No authority saying, "Excuse me, wrong tomb. Move this way. He's in this tomb right here. Let's put an end to this story right here and now." No thought, no hope of resurrection at all. Just confusion and despair until she comes to the tomb again, and with her own eyes sees him alive in the body. Listen to the gospel again (20:11-18)

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept she bent over to look into the tomb and 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 they've taken away my Lord and I do not know where they've laid him. As she had said this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and she did not know that it was Jesus. [DR: She wasn't looking for him]. Jesus said to her, 'woman why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' [DR: The King James Version says it so beautifully here. 'Why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?'] Supposing him to be the gardener she said to him 'Sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you've laid him and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni,' which means teacher. Jesus said to her don't hold on to me because I've not yet ascended to the Father but go to my brothers. 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 our Lord.'

For Mary the resurrection of Jesus, the return to Jesus of life on that first Easter was absolutely and totally unexpected. Totally unanticipated. Totally out of the question.

The same thing seems to be true of those other disciples we meet in the stories that are recorded for all posterity.

- So much so that one of Jesus' followers, Thomas, even though all his friends had seen Jesus by this time, said, "I will not believe until I see him for myself and touch him for myself" (John 20:25). He refused to believe it. He refused to take their account as truth.

- And on that same day, that same Easter Sunday, later in the day, two other disciples were walking on a road outside of Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35), and when Jesus walked up to them and began to walk and talk with them, they didn't recognize him, just as Mary had at first not recognized him: they simply were not looking for him, even though they'd begun to hear tales that something was happening. They remained depressed and hopeless until evening came when this stranger began to speak to them about the scriptures referring to the Messiah. And it was only when they stopped to eat and as he broke bread, eating and drinking with them, that their eyes were opened and they knew it was him, Jesus. And their lives were changed. And Mary's life was changed when she saw. And Thomas's life was changed when he one week later saw as well.

"Make, make no mistake if he rose at all it was as his body. If the cells dissolution did not reverse, the molecules re-knit the amino acids rekindle" these people who knew Jesus would not have believed! They did *"not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence, making of the event a parable, a sign painted in [their gullible] credulity. For them the stone rolled back was not papier maché. Not a stone in a story but a vast rock of materiality, which in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day.* It was when they saw that, that their desolation and their depression, their helplessness and their hopelessness, their fear and their sense of being crushed, turned finally into joy and power and hope. When they saw him, well, that was then that a new day began for them that would never end.

There are some of us here today who desperately need that new day to dawn. We need to hear this story as if for the first time, and maybe for some of us it is the first time. But for many of us we've heard it again and again and again, but we need to hear and interact with that story for the first time as if we were there in that story with Mary. We need to experience, too, the same kind of conviction, the same kind of transformation that she and those early followers of Jesus experienced because of that first Easter. For some of us caught up in the skepticism of our age (and I too am one of those from this age!) – this new day will only come when we do our rational thinking: when we sort out the evidence and we read our books and our articles, when we talk and discuss to make sure, as far as we can, that the lives that were changed on that day were changed not because people were gullible but because they actually saw something that they could never deny.

The best book I would recommend to you in order to follow this course of thought is a book written a couple of years ago by Dr. Tom Wright, formerly of Oxford, and now of St. Andrews University in Scotland. It's called *Surprised By Hope*. Indeed I want to refer you to three books if you want to read more than just one! Easy to remember because each title begins with "Surprised By" (just stick 'surprised by' into Google!). *Surprised*

By Hope (N. Tom Wright); *Surprised By Joy* (C.S. Lewis) and *Surprised By Oxford* (Carolyn Weber). Three powerful books to help you think through all of these events that changed the lives of those early disciples. For some, for some our conviction and our transformation will only occur when we engage our minds and think through again what happened at that first Easter.

But for others I know, rational inquiry will do us no good. Maybe we've been down that route and maybe that's not just the kind of people we are. Maybe we've tried everything. We're still, we're still at the end of our rope: mad at God, mad at the world, nowhere to turn expecting nothing, God far away out of reach, and seemingly out of touch. Maybe that's where we are.

But my friends, even and perhaps especially if that's where we are, the story of Easter has some really, really good news for us. Because isn't that precisely, I mean, precisely, isn't that where Mary was? And where Thomas was? And where those two disciples were on that first Easter day when they first saw Jesus, risen from the grave unexpectedly, coming to them? Isn't the good news precisely this, that when we least expect it and when we are not seeking, Jesus the risen one is seeking us and always will – seeking you and me as he was then.

This was the experience of the great Christian author and storyteller C.S. Lewis who wrote of his experience about first believing in God (not of becoming a Christian; that was later), having a sense that God existed and that God was alive and not merely an idea. C.S. Lewis first wrote of his experience like this in one of those 'surprised by' books: *Surprised By Joy* (p.179). He writes,

'the odd thing was that before God closed in on me' [DR: what a strange sentence that is! 'God closing in on me,' seeking us out just as the risen Jesus sought out Mary, Thomas and many others], and seeks out, you and me!]. 'The odd thing was that before God closed in on me I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice. In a sense I was just going up Heading Hill and Oxford on the top of a bus. Without words and I think almost without images I became aware though that I was holding something at bay, shutting something out. I could open the door or keep it shut. Neither choice was presented as a duty. No threat or promise was attached to either though I knew that to open the door meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. You could argue that I was not a free agent but I am more inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act – the most I have ever done.

A few months before his death Lewis looked back at that moment and reflected on it with these words. He said,

'I had never had the experience of looking for God. It was the other way around. He was the hunter or so it seemed to me and I was the deer. He took unerring aim and fired and I am very thankful that this is how the first conscious meeting occurred. It forearms one against subsequent fears that the whole thing was wish

fulfillment, credulity. Something one didn't wish for can hardly be that.'
(C.S. Lewis: *An Examined Life*, 2007, p.118, by Bruce L. Edwards)

And this, of course, is what you'd expect isn't it, if Jesus Christ rose from the dead that first Easter? *Not just that we should look for him . . . and we should – we should surely look for him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Just as Mary went to the tomb we should look for him . . . But, more than that, to believe that even at the very moment when we've given up our search, when we are filled with hopelessness and despair, when we are lonely or blue or filled with the cynicism of our age, that at that moment, at that precise moment He is still looking for you and me, in love for all eternity. Looking for you and me. Here the John's Gospel again (John 20:11-18)*

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept she bent over to look into the tomb and 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've 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. She was not looking for Jesus alive. Jesus said to her woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Why weepst thou? Whom sleekest thou? Supposing him to be the gardener she said to him, 'sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you've laid him and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary,' David, James, Jane, he calls out our name. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples I've seen the Lord.

And John Updike: *Make no mistake! If he rose at all it was as his body. Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, side-stepping transcendence. The stone is rolled back. Not papier maché, not a stone in a story, but the vast rock of materiality. Let us not seek to make it less monstrous for our own convenience or our own sense of beauty lest ... awakened in one unthinkable hour we lose sight of the truth, the vision, that pivotal moment in history that alone can change us and heal us, not only for eternity but now, in the body as we live.*

From that moment in history everything changed. For Mary, for the world, and by the grace of God for you and me too. May it be so.

Let us pray. Lord may we seek after You with all our heart and soul and mind and strength now and as we leave this place. But may we know that above all our seeking You are seeking us. Indeed, you stand at the door of our hearts and knock. Grant us grace to open the door whether for the first time or even if we've done it many times. And let You, our risen Savior, into the very center of our being. For this we were made. Hear this, our prayer. Amen.

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