

John 20: 1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

The Gardener of Resurrection

Years ago, David Hadju wrote a piece in the Atlantic about the state of Jazz in NYC...he visited the Village Vanguard, a Jazz institution. He saw a trumpet player... could it be... Wynton Marsalis? Hadju writes:

"I could now see, it was indeed Marsalis. He played a ballad, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You," unaccompanied with Marsalis deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. "I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ..." The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled. Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED."

I want you to know I told this story in a sermon once, and someone's cell phone went off later in the sermon!

As Mary looked into that tomb, she could have said the same thing. But something happens, leading Mary to say to the other disciples:

"I have seen the Lord," That's the first Easter sermon. These words are later repeated when Jesus appears to the disciples and they say "We have seen the Lord." I can't improve upon it. Please stand for the benediction!

But think of that sermon for a moment. No theological speculation or proof or doctrinal agreements... just those five words. Literal, physical, spiritual, mythological, experiential, metaphorical — I'd imagine all of those perspectives are present in this room today. Theologians have been arguing for 20 centuries about this.

But here is what we know. SOMETHING happened. As Marcus Borg says in his book "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time": "Easter means Jesus was experienced after his death"...How he was experienced is another conversation. But Jesus was

experienced after his death and the world was turned upside down and here we are still talking about it.

Now, here's what we know without a single doubt. Are you ready? This is an advanced interpretation right here. John can run faster than Peter! Now that is life changing! John makes sure to say it twice! I beat him to the tomb! V4 and V8

But despite the boys being boys portion of this text...the real star of the show is Mary Magdalene.

Mary comes to the tomb because the tomb is the closest she can get to Jesus. The Jesus that had called her, restored her, giving her life meaning and purpose. The Jesus that had taken her seriously offered her a future and hope. (Side Note: Jesus believed and listened to women and we should too). Now he is gone. Imagine the state she is in coming to the tomb that morning. Eyes red from weeping and sleepless nights. And now, to add insult to injury, in one more twist of the knife, his dead body was gone too. She runs to tell the others.

What do they find when they get there? The linen wrappings neatly lying there, with the cloth for Jesus' head rolled up in place by itself. V8 claims that there was some belief, but maybe all they believed is that the body wasn't there. Because they all left...except for Mary.

Mary, our patron saint of knowing how to always show up, stays. Weeping. At that moment the world's grief is concentrated in Mary's grief. Those words she said to the others: "**They have taken**" are the shout of a world crying out for justice. **They have taken**, my home, my spouse, my dignity, my dreams, my hopes, my health, my land, my children. "They have taken!" Stand there with Mary and weep. And protest.

She bends over to look inside. Through her tears she sees the angels. Maybe that's the only way we can see angels, is through our tears. She turns around and nearly bumps into Jesus! She thinks he is the gardener! Maybe he looked like one with the dirt from his own tomb under his nails. And how appropriate because a garden is a place for seeds to die and new life to spring up. She didn't know she was talking to the gardener of resurrection.

What will Jesus do to break the spell she is under?

As the pastor of a large church in San Francisco for all those years, sometimes I am recognized around town. It doesn't happen all the time, unlike Ron Burgundy, I'm NOT "kind of a big deal" but it does happen. Usually it is startling. My wife and I

were in Chicago last fall for a conference. It was during the World Series when the Houston Astros were playing the Satan Dodgers. We were sitting at a bar rooting for the Astros as all good Christians would... and let's just say I was getting a little emotional. I was displaying my unhappiness in, shall we say, forceful language. Shouting a few times "Gosh Darn It you Astros!" And then a tap on the shoulder with those words I have heard many times that seem to come out of the blue: "Pastor Fred?" (internally I'm thinking 'really? In Chicago? At this bar? While I'm losing it watching the world series?) I look at a person who tells me I was there pastor for 10 years. After just a moment I recognized him. And, internally cataloging my behavior from the last 5 minutes! "Hey there just telling these good folks at the bar all about Jesus!" Side note: 5 minutes later my phone was stolen from the bar! It would be bad theology to say God was trying to remind me of how ridiculous my behavior had been...but just sayin'!

Jesus breaks Mary's spell with one word. Her name. "Mary!" I love it that he says nothing else. Just calls her name. And her scales fall off. She responds 'Rabbouni!' (teacher). For one brief shining moment she was the whole church, seeing the whole of the gospel. And in that turning around we see the whole gospel. Jesus calls us by name. Hear Jesus calling your name right now. Fred, John, Deborah, Emily, Steven, Jennifer, Kathleen, Jeff. He calls all of our names. Maybe the reason you are in this room right now is just to hear that.

What does Mary do? She reaches out to embrace the risen Jesus. Of course she does. She celebrates, she rejoices, she shares in the wonder. Think about every embrace you have enjoyed. A cuddle of a child, the reassurance of a friend, the greeting of a companion, the ecstasy of a lover, the consolation of a sympathetic therapist, the strength of a rescuer. But this is the definitive embrace of all time. Mary meets her maker, her redeemer, her empowerer. If you want to know what heaven feels like, this is it. Sorrow turns to dancing, Words turn to song, death turns to life.

Our eldest child, John Mark, works and lives in Saigon (or Ho Chi Minh City depending on your politics). Our children now could and do live all over the world. Thank God for FaceTime...but it's not the same as having him here so he visits usually once a year. And there's always the embrace at the airport when he has to return. It's the embrace of trying to hold on to that moment, not knowing the next time I'll feel his body, smell him, hear him (live), experience him, this 33 year old man, who in our minds is also the child we coddled and rocked to sleep. We want to keep that moment forever. Think about those times you have never wanted a hug to go away.

But ponder that feeling for a moment, however wonderful it is. And borrowing from Sam Wells, vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London: *"Doesn't the desire to preserve*

that embrace ultimately reduce the other person to an instrument of your own needs? Isn't there more to their life than making you feel cherished and beloved? Jesus says to Mary, "Don't cling to me" I love you totally and have been raised to restore you to life and be with you forever. But I'm also here for everyone else." I'm here to restore and renew the world Mary. This is the beginning of the gospel, not the whole of it. This embrace is a divine embrace meant to go beyond you and me. You must announce this good news to others."

And with that Mary becomes the apostle to the apostles and is the first to announce the resurrection. If it weren't for women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection! It's all contained in one word "go". Just as the entire gospel is encased in that one word "Mary", so the whole of ministry and mission is encapsulated in that single word "go". Mary who was powerless, pitiful, and dejected is now purposeful, focused, and energized. Her task is to tell. The resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life God has given to Jesus, God is giving to all of humanity.

Three things to think about after hearing this story:

#1 God, in Jesus, meets Mary in her tears. This story begins with a woman looking deep into the heart of darkness, believes all is lost and meaningless and ruined and rotten. That could be your starting place. Perhaps it is only through tears that we can see God, can see angels. God will meet you in your tears, in your desperation, in your dead end, in your addiction, in your loss, in your questions, in your longings. With resurrection.

#2 God, in Jesus, chooses Mary in her tears. Those tears represent a deep love for Jesus that were crafted in the cultivation of a new life within her by the Gardner of her soul. Those tears represent a deep humility as the recipient of God's deep love and mercy and yes, forgiveness. Richard Rohr says Once you can forgive the imperfections in yourself, you can forgive them in others too. Mary had learned this from Jesus. 2/3s of his teaching talked about forgiveness. Mary had been told "you, Mary are God's beloved child." And she believed it. Jesus spoke a new identity into Mary and does the same for you. Jesus is calling your name. Death can't hold him. He's come back for you. He's come back for Stone Church too, my friends. God is by no means done with Stone Church of Willow Glen.

#3 God, in Jesus, reveals to Mary, and to us, what God is really like. Just a few days earlier on the cross, Jesus showed us a God who recycles violence and state sanctioned and religiously endorsed murder into love, grace, and forgiveness with those famous words "Father forgive them, they know not what they are doing." Now he tells Mary, go and tell my... deserters? Cowards? I'd like to have a word with

them! No. Go and tell my Brothers. We are all the siblings of Jesus. We are all God's beloved children and there has never been a second that we haven't been.

The cell-phone offender scooted into the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with ... you ..." The ovation was tremendous.

What a metaphor for what Christian spirituality looks like. The Spirit is playing the song of beauty, the song of liberation, the song of hope, the song of resurrection, the song of equity, the song where everyone has enough and everyone is loved. In our fear and fragile humanity we get caught up in different songs of greed, violence, acquisition, coercion, exclusion ... but the Spirit, The Spirit of resurrection, she takes our broken songs and weaves them back into her song over and over.

Why was that stone rolled away? Not so that Jesus could get out. It was so that you could get in. Let us pray.

*God of new creation,
from the womb of earth
you raised the Lord of life:
may we receive the testimony of Mary Magdalene
who met you in a garden
and reached for your embrace;
may we see you where we least expect you,
and rejoice that love will never die,
through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life.
Amen.*