

April 5, 2015, Easter Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

One Easter Sunday, at a church I was at some years ago, just as the service was about to begin, the trumpets poised for fanfare, the people dressed in their finery, the worship leaders summoning up the appropriate pomp, just as this most festive and important service was getting started, an usher, a middle-aged man named Dennis, burst into the entrance and interrupted the morning with a sudden, urgent announcement: “A set of Toyota car keys have been found in the women’s bathroom.” To which someone else remarked, “What was Dennis doing in the women’s bathroom?” In the midst of all the white and gold and “Alleluia’s,” there was something refreshingly earthy about that. Something right about starting off Easter Sunday with a bit of humor, a bit of bathroom humor, so to speak.

Easter ought to include laughter, and the incongruous, if it is to be true what Easter is, if it is to resemble anything like the first Easter. There is an earthiness to today’s Easter gospel, which takes place in a garden. You can imagine a stark tomb, and the massive rock that enclosed it, cold and hard and dark. But picture also, outside the tomb some plants, perhaps some flowering plants. Picture something that needed to be tended, something that calls for and explains the presence of a Gardener—or, at least, one who is assumed to be a Gardener. Like that funny announcement I mentioned earlier, John’s Easter gospel has surprising people showing up in surprising places. There are no bathrooms, but it is about the earthiest bodily function of all, death.

But though nothing could be more serious than life lost, there is humor in the gospel, too. There is comedy in all the confused conversations, in the foot race to the tomb, in Mary Magdalene’s misidentification. I sometimes want to laugh out loud there, when Mary mistakes the risen Jesus for a gardener. It makes me chuckle with nervous embarrassment, remembering times I’ve blithely introduced myself to people who know me already. Just did it again last Thursday night at the Seder.

This odd detail about Mary mistaking Jesus for the Gardener may seem like a funny addition to the Easter gospel—somewhat like that announcement about a set of Toyota car keys was a funny addition to the Easter liturgy. In that announcement, as in the gospel, there is an urgency, a focus and a need for immediate action, that comes when something important is lost. You know what that’s like, don’t you? When you race around, searching for your car keys, your glasses, your wallet, your phone. What an awful feeling it is, when you lose things you need. Your whole world narrows. Everything else recedes into the background as you search for it. All energy and emotion is concentrated on finding it—overlaid with a despair that you will not. Where is it? I can’t find it! Tell me!

These are the words and the state of Mary Magdalene, in the gospel. Incongruous though it is to compare our trivial searches with the magnitude what she has lost, the story has the same kind of frenzy, the ever more anxious focus, the emotional progression as again and again you tell those around you what is missing, as Mary does. What she says goes from generalized panic, to personalized anguish, to accusation: “We do not know where ...” “I do not know where...” and “Tell me, where!”

This last one she says to an innocent bystander—whose identity, of course, we know. We know that it is Him, the one whom she is looking for, that the assumption she has lost him is why she is crying. In light of this, that he knows all of this, his questions: “Why are you weeping?” and “Whom are you looking for?” do not seem all that innocent. Maybe we sympathize with Mary, also then, when she responds with such vehemence when she has to explain for a third time what has been lost. She

loses it. She turns on her questioner and implies it's his fault. To the "gardener," Mary says, "If you're the one who's taken him, tell me where you've put him!"

I wonder if Mary laughed through her tears when she realized it was Jesus, Jesus, whom she was accusing of stealing Jesus. Amidst all the terrified confusion, and the frantic search for the body, this gospel has whispers of underlying comedy, dare I say, slapstick? All this racing around, and paths crossing, and searching for someone who's not there, whom they have just missed. They just miss Jesus, when they race to the tomb. They just miss him. It's almost as if he just stepped out for a bit. It's like he had somewhere he needed to go, something he needed to do. We know he'll be back in a just few.

If it has the sound of a joke it is also a creedal affirmation, a statement of faith from the Apostles' Creed. Jesus wasn't in the tomb because after he "died, and was buried, he descended into the dead." He stepped out of the tomb, to stop by hell. That's where he needed to go, what he needed to do: to continue the journey through death, to release everything held by death, to announce victory to all the forces that defy God. Christ descended to the depths to free everything held captive there. In the words of an ancient Easter sermon on Christ's descent: "He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve." This sermon from the second century says he approached them saying, "I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now, by my own authority, command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place."

Jesus left the tomb, to find and retrieve the lost, all our old Adam, all our ways of sin. Jesus left the tomb to find the lost and the least, the lost sheep. That is what God does: leaves the ninety-nine for the lamb that has strayed; sweeps a whole house, for one lost coin; nothing too trivial. Jesus goes down into the depths for it, for us, for all that we have lost.

Perhaps you have lost something, perhaps something small. Perhaps you lost your composure, just this morning, or in the last couple days. In the busy-ness of Holy Week you were short with someone, or made a snide remark. Perhaps the pastor is speaking about herself.

Perhaps you have lost your temper—not such a small thing, when we do that, when we explode at whomever happens to be standing next to us. They may be completely innocent. Or they may be someone who has given you great cause for anger, someone who has wronged you. Maybe your anger at your neighbor, or at your boss, or at the system at large has you so irate that you can't see straight. Angry tears can make your vision blur. Or, perhaps you are the one who is in the wrong. Perhaps you have done what you should not have done, and you have lost your credibility. Perhaps you have lost your health, or someone you love. Perhaps, amidst all the loss, you have lost hope.

Today Jesus calls your name, as he called Mary's name, as he found her, she who thought she had lost him. In all the ways that we are at a loss, the resurrected Christ has searched us out and found us. Jesus went to hell and back, to find us, to find the holy people that we were made to be, and to return us to ourselves, to re-create us, and all of creation. He is the Gardener, after all. The one who made the first Eden, now opens to us a new Eden: everlasting life and hope, for he has the keys, the keys that lock fast hell, and the keys that open the gates of heaven, and he is giving them to us.