

“Why Are We Here Today?”
John 20:1-18
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We have some odd traditions in the church. The ritual of ordination, for example, just looks strange to outsiders. Midnight Christmas Eve Services, which I have led in other settings, challenge the leaders of the services to stay awake. And Easter Sunrise Services, like the one some of us participated in this morning, really push the margins of sanity, as most of the people there are still wondering about in a fog.

Now, I know there are early-morning people, God bless them, and I realize the point is to relive the discovery of an empty tomb by certain women at dawn; but I try not to talk to anyone, including God, before I have had my first cup of coffee! Part of my problem is that I don't have much experience with this tradition. I didn't grow up in church and the church I entered as a teenager did not have an Easter Sunrise Service.

My first experience of this kind was going to a service at Morehead State University in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. I was an undergrad student at the University of Kentucky, an hour away, but a group of us decided to go to Morehead for the Easter weekend to see friends. Being a pious lot or having some pious souls among us, we decided to go to the Easter Sunrise Service while we were there.

The service took place at a stadium. We arrived a bit early and thus were able to select our seats carefully and begin to prepare them. You see, the temperature was somewhere in the mid-20's and the metal bleachers were covered with frost or ice, I'm not sure which. So, we had to remain seated for quite a while in order to thaw our seats.

About the time we did, some nice older people arrived, parents and grandparents of students, and they asked if we could move down. It was one of those defining ethical moments when we discover what we really believe. “Should we give up our thawed seats for these people or should we hang on to our seats?” We decided to hang on to our seats... though we did allow our elders to walk past us and thaw their own seats.

But this is all I remember about that service. I'm sure scripture was read, we sang "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" and someone attempted to proclaim the Good News for people who were half asleep, but all I remember is the frozen bleachers because all I could do the entire service was wonder if we had made the right decision.

So, why do we have such services where there are so many obstacles and distractions? And why do so many people attend them? Because services like this approximate the time of the discovery of an empty tomb and we hope this will help us in some way. It is the same story we have heard many times, but context makes a difference.

Reading the story of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi is always moving for Christians, but reading it at Caesarea Philippi is more moving. Reading the story of Exodus is always moving for Jews, but reading the story with loved ones during Passover creates space for a far richer experience. Reading the story of the prophet Muhammad is always moving for Muslims, but reading the story while on pilgrimage to Mecca takes on another level of meaning. Thus, we gather at dawn to hear a familiar story hoping that it will speak to us in a different way.

Perhaps this is why so many of us gather at all on Easter, even at this late hour. Most churches are fuller than usual on Easter, we all know this, but why? Why are so many of us here today?

Some of us are here out deep conviction; we have come to celebrate the resurrection! Others are here out of habit. We have done this every year for so long that we cannot remember an Easter we were not in church. And some are here due to family pressure – our mother or father, grandmother or grandfather wants us here, and we are more likely to be welcome at the dinner table if we have the courtesy to show up!

But I suspect that most people who show up on Easter, more than an average Sunday, come hoping that the story might somehow speak to us in a different way on this special day. We come out of a deep longing for some evidence or experience to convince us that perhaps, just perhaps, it could be true. We come with hope, not knowledge or even belief, but hope that life could prevail over death; love could be stronger than fear; good might, just this once, have the final word over evil. We come wanting to believe, needing to believe, but not sure we can.

And let me be clear. When I speak of people gathering on Easter more out of desperate hope than deep-down faith, I am not just talking about those who do not identify with any church. There are many skeptics in our time who have given up on organized religion, for reasons many of us understand, but who have not given up on God.

In *The Question of God* Harvard professor Armand Nicholi, Jr. compares the perspectives of Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis. While noting Freud's avowed atheism, he references correspondence in which the pioneer of psychoanalytic thought betrayed a different view. In his formal writings, Freud dismissed any possibility for the Divine and all that would go with belief. But in his private writings he seemed at times to assume that there was a God. There are many who feel this way.

But I am not just talking about people outside the church. I'm talking about people inside, many of whom sit on a pew quite often and want to believe but wonder if it is all true, people like Nicodemus who is a seeker, but a seeker from the inside. He believes in God and has studied Torah, but longs for more. So, he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Many of us can only ask our questions, name our doubts and express our longings, under some kind of cover.

This is what the characters are doing in the reading from John 20. Mary Magdalene does not go to the tomb while it is still dark on the first day of the week to celebrate her hope in the resurrection and thus start a tradition of sunrise services that has lasted 2,000 years. She goes to see Jesus' body one last time, to anoint him, as other gospel writers tell us, with other women. As one scholar has put it, the women are the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. Women do most of the heavy lifting.

Mary goes in grief, mourning the death of a teacher and friend, exhibiting ritual behavior that will allow her to process her emotions. She goes to look at him, to convince herself that this really happened, still wishing for a different outcome, hoping she might wake up from a bad dream. When she arrives, she discovers that the stone has been moved from the front of the tomb and without bothering to look inside, she assumes the worst. Someone has taken his body, thus depriving her of any possibility of closure. Even though Jesus has alluded to his death

and resurrection, it does not even occur to her that an empty tomb could mean good news. She is consumed by grief.

So, she runs to Simon Peter and another disciple who is with him and says, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they have laid him.” Peter and the other disciple immediately run to the tomb. There is a lot of running in this story. It is almost enough to make you think a Sunday marathon is “O.K.” Almost...

Anyway, they run to the tomb, we don’t know why, whether in fear or hope, and the other disciple wins the race. He looks in and sees burial cloths but no body. Peter does the same and then walks inside. The other disciple follows him and John says that upon seeing the cloths with no body, he believes... but believes what? For John goes on to say these two disciples do not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead, and then, he says they return to their homes.

At this point, the focus shifts back to Mary. She is weeping. Perhaps the simple reality of an empty tomb has convinced Peter and his friend to believe something, but this does not convince Mary. There are many different ways people come to believe. As she is weeping, Mary sees two angels who ask her why she is weeping and she tells them whereupon they say nothing more. It is odd that they have nothing to add. We think of angels as being helpful, but these two are as about as clumsy and inarticulate as Clarence in *It’s a Wonderful Life!*

Perhaps they are just getting ready to speak when Mary notices a man standing behind her. It is Jesus, but Mary doesn’t recognize him. We wonder why. Is it too dark, does he look different or is she simply so consumed by grief that she cannot see Jesus even when is standing right before her? We do sometimes miss things that are right before us.

Pastoral care professor Dan Bagby tells a story he heard as a missionary kid growing up in Brazil. A geological team from the United States visited the region of Minas Gerais. One member of the team was walking through a poor part of the territory and taking note of people living in makeshift homes made from cardboard. In one of these homes, near a river, he noticed a large dirty rock holding a door open. He asked the owner if he could take the rock to examine it. The man said sure, as long as he found another rock to put in its place. In the lab, the geologist

determined that it was a diamond, a 727-carat diamond, to this day one of the 10 largest diamonds ever found. It was being used as a doorstep.

The things we miss, precious things... like when a child learns to walk, like when a spouse does something special for us, like when the Risen Christ is right in front of us. Mary thinks he is the gardener. Like the angels, he asks her why she is weeping and she tells him. Then, he calls her by name, "Mary!" and suddenly, hearing his voice speak her name, she realizes it is him. "Rabbouni!" she says, "Teacher!" and apparently, she tries to embrace him because he says, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to be with God. Go and tell my brothers I am doing so." Mary goes and tells them, "I have seen the Lord!"

So, what is the message for us here? For one thing, the first people who encounter the Risen Christ start out in the darkness of grief just like us. If we learn nothing else from them, we learn that struggle is a part of life and being honest about our struggles is "O.K."

But the early followers of Jesus do not end in sadness. Eventually they come to believe. Yet they do so in different ways. Peter and his companion seem to take a cognitive approach. They need evidence to convince them, evidence like an empty tomb. Mary needs something more. She needs a personal experience with the Risen Christ. More than this, she needs time with him, time to process something she has never experienced before, and in this time, it takes more than one sense to appropriate the experience. Seeing alone is not enough, she has to hear his voice and then wants to touch him, embrace him.

So, there are many different ways to believe and one of them is cognitive. There is nothing wrong with this path, as long as we don't get stuck here. The stories of resurrection are full of mystery and wonder such that we cannot find the kind of indisputable evidence we can for other things. Any reality big enough to save us is too large to grasp.

But for many of us there has to be some intellectual plausibility of any idea or reality to make room for belief. For me the most compelling argument in regard to resurrection is the transformation of fearful disciples who disappear when it comes time for the cross into passionate believers who are willing to die for their faith. What else, other than

some transcendent experience like encountering the Risen Christ, could explain this transformation?

Yet the path of experience is also valid, indeed necessary for many of us. We do not encounter the historical Jesus as the first followers do, but we do encounter the Spirit of the Risen Christ in different ways. Often, like Mary, we need time to process our experience. We may miss it at first, overlook the precious rock at our door, and we may need all of our senses to understand Whose presence we experience. But when we do, like Mary, we want to hold on to the moment and keep it forever.

In writing about the significance of Easter, Scotty McLennan describes his mother's experience with the Risen Christ (*Jesus Was a Liberal*, p. 208). She was praying intensely one evening at home when she first sensed his presence fill the room and then felt his hand on her shoulder. There was no visual element to the experience and she did not have this kind of profound awareness of Jesus' presence all the time, but the memory of this one experience sustained her throughout her life.

I have had similar experiences, often in places of great need. For example, while waiting for the death of a member in another setting and praying with her family, we all had this eerie yet peaceful feeling that we were not alone. The woman dying exuded a calm sense of Christ's presence throughout her life. Some part of her faith seemed to bolster ours, and so we not only knew we were not alone, we experienced her death as a peaceful transition into the arms of a loving God.

That's why we are here today. We are searching for this kind of experience. We want to believe, but we need something to convince us. There is no formula or set of techniques through which to produce such an experience, though God is with us always, offering life and hope. Different things may cue our awareness – a familiar hymn, a word of scripture, a time of silence, the beauty of a sunrise, a simple act of service. But if we remain open and are willing to embrace the Holy when we realize we are not alone, we will have the experience we need.

For Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia! Christ has opened Paradise! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, alleluia! May God grant us the grace to believe.