

“Clue” An Easter Sermon

What a delight it is to be here today! Easter Sunday: I love everything about it! This is my favorite day of the year. The music is wonderful, people are so cheery, spring is on the way... maybe... somewhere. It's great.

There are lots of reasons to be in church on Easter. Most people come because they believe, or *want* to believe.¹ But folks also come to affirm their connections to family, or to tradition, or in a more general sort of way to God. It's all good. If you have to pick one day out of the year to be in church, this is the one!

I also recognize that there are varying degrees of discomfort associated with being here. I haven't been a regular in church all my life, so I remember what it feels like to sneak in at the back and sit in the balcony; not to be too sure about when to stand up and sit down. Nowadays I come early and leave late; but I remember when it was the other way around. And I was always suspicious of what I might hear. So to alleviate some of that anxiety, I want to tip my hand at the very beginning.

In ordinary conversation there are certain phrases that creep into our speech that you won't hear today; phrases that set off our internal security alarms. For example, when somebody says, “No offense...” what's the next word going to be? Right! “No offense, *but*...” and then you know you have to duck. You know the message you're about to hear will be offensive: “No offense, but those pants make you look *enormous!*” “No offense, but your breath would kill a buzzard!”

Another inauspicious beginning is, “I probably shouldn't tell you this... but...” I always want to say, “If you probably shouldn't tell me, don't.” “I probably shouldn't tell you this, but that woman made brazen overtures to a man who didn't have a friend in this town until she came here.”² When somebody begins, “I probably shouldn't tell you this,” you know you're about to hear something hurtful or unpleasant that you can't do anything about. You know it's your turn to hold the glue ball.

And if somebody starts in, “I don't want you to take this personally...” duck and cover is the best strategy.

So, in the interests of full disclosure, here comes a message that will offend your intellect and perhaps your sensibilities. Offense intended. And I probably *should* tell you about it because it's my job and because it's the most important clue I know to what life is all about. And I hope when I'm done you will take it very personally, because if you don't it won't make any sense. So that's where we're going.

I think it best just to head right into the offensive part, don't you?

¹ Thanks to Iowa Conference CENTER/LEARN/SEARCH student Carol Kelly for reminding me of this in a sermon she preached at Plymouth on March 15, 2008.

² That, of course, is a quotation from *The Music Man*, by Meredith Wilson.

The Easter story is out of step with everything we know. Dead things stay dead. Death is where we're all going. Life is hard, and then you die. Two things are certain in life: death and taxes. Resurrection is something with which few of us have any direct experience. People who are dead long enough to be really dead—say, three days—generally stay that way.

So you'd think that a claim like resurrection would come with proof, with documentation; but no. What we get instead of proof are stories that are more than a little bit fuzzy around the edges. The tomb is empty, and people struggle with what that means. The risen Christ appears to various groupings of his followers at different times in different versions of the story. But almost always they fail to recognize him. We might be tempted to think that we would have fewer intellectual difficulties with the claim of resurrection if we had been there to see for ourselves. But those who see don't usually understand what they're seeing. Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus walk seven miles with Jesus, conversing all the way, but don't recognize him. A group of disciples encounters Jesus by the lakeshore in Galilee, but they don't know it is he.

An empty tomb and several cases of mistaken identity: that isn't much proof, is it? Nowhere in the Bible is resurrection described, *per se*. The Apostle Paul talks about resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians; but he says that the dead are buried a physical body and raised "a spiritual body."³ I'm not entirely sure even he knows what he means by that.

But he knows it's real. That's because he himself has experienced the presence of the risen Christ in his life. The message of Easter is offensive. It insults your intelligence if you feel the need to have iron-clad proof. But it becomes real to people as they experience the risen Christ.

The Gospel According to John is all about experiencing Jesus. As we have seen throughout the season of Lent, John has a succession of stories intended to lead us toward the conclusion that Jesus is the Word made flesh: God's special message to us about the ultimate nature of things, delivered in the form of a human life.

People who encounter Jesus have their lives changed, their minds blown, their hearts touched, their afflictions healed, their directions altered. When Jesus encounters people, outcasts are welcomed in and affirmed as the people of God. The blind see. The dead are granted new life. All of this happens when people come to understand the clue to the meaning of life that is contained in the person of Jesus. And the astounding thing of it is that this clue, this understanding, this realization dawns differently in the life of each different person who encounters Jesus.

In today's lesson, sunrise arrives for Mary Magdalene, who "comes to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses." Tradition has it that Mary Magdalene was a morally suspect character, a prostitute; but there is no scriptural evidence for this.⁴ In

³ The whole chapter of I Corinthians 15 is devoted to the subject of resurrection.

⁴ Usually she simply appears in lists of those who keep vigil at the foot of the cross, and who go to the tomb on Easter morning. In Mark 16:9, part of a late addition to the gospel, she is

John, Mary Magdalene (which means that her name was Mary and she was from the town of Magdala, on the shore of Lake Galilee) is one of Jesus' most faithful followers. She is among the very small group of women who stay close by as Jesus dies on the cross.

Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the tomb. In other gospels, she has come with a group of women to embalm Jesus' body. But here in John she comes merely to mourn.⁵ She discovers that the stone has been moved away from the mouth of the tomb. She runs to tell Peter and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved,"—tradition holds this to be John—that the tomb is empty. She does not begin that conversation with, "I probably shouldn't tell you this."

For reasons I do not begin to understand, this gospel recounts a race to the tomb won by the disciple who is not Peter. The first disciple glances into the tomb but does not enter. Peter investigates more fully. Then the other disciple goes in, sees and believes; although precisely what he believes we're not told.

Then the two men return to the others, and Mary is left alone again, weeping. First she looks into the tomb and sees two angels who ask her, "Why are you weeping?" She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." The pathos is palpable. She came to be close to him one more time, and now even that is denied her.

Then she turns around, sees Jesus and does not know it is he. How could she not know? Most interpretations psychologize this to death: she was stunned with grief, she had tears in her eyes, she wasn't really looking at him, she didn't want to meet the gaze of a stranger, whatever. But not recognizing the risen Christ, as we have seen, is a theme common to all the gospels. Part of the message of Easter is that the risen Christ is abroad in the world, and even his closest followers do not reliably recognize him.

But Mary knows him when he speaks her name. He says, "Mary!" and then she knows. She turns to him and says, "Rabbi!" Evidently she reaches for him, because he tells her not to hold on to him. "Mary" and "Rabbi": it's hard to know how to characterize this exchange. If you're reading it aloud, it's hard to know what inflection to use. And inflection makes all the difference.

Maybe you remember this from Stan Freberg. [Play audio selection from "John and Marsha".]

So how would you say it? I think that Jesus is waking Mary from one reality to another: "Mary!" Because once her eyes are opened to see him, everything is changed.

We come to Easter seeking proof. What we get is ambiguous stories and an invitation to a relationship. Easter becomes real to us when we find ourselves in relationship with the living Christ. As Matt said so beautifully last Sunday, this relationship is very personal, but it is not private. It is something we share with a whole

described as one "from whom [Jesus] had cast out seven demons." A similar reference appears in Luke 8:2.

⁵ In John, the body has already been embalmed, courtesy of Nicodemus. Joseph of Arimathea supplied the tomb in which Jesus was buried... however briefly! (See John 19:38-40)

community of faith, people who are struggling to come to terms with the same reality: that Jesus Christ is a living presence, and that knowing and serving him changes everything. Easter becomes the clue to understanding our lives and our world in a whole new way.

What if it's true that death is not the end? What if it's true that power—Pontius Pilate and the Roman legions and swords and whips and crosses and nails and brute force—what if all that in the final analysis doesn't win, but love wins? What if love is the greatest strength in all the universe? What if life ultimately takes us not to dead ends, but to new beginnings? What if, finally, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Well then life isn't about getting ahead, or making a buck, or finishing first. The only way you can really die is by failing to live, by being scared to death, by clinging so tightly to what you have that what you have turns out to be nothing worth having. Easter is the clue to all of that.

So if this message offends your sense of reason and stands our everyday understanding of the world on its head; then you've been listening, and I thank you. I knew I should tell you this, and I couldn't wait for the opportunity. And please, whatever else you do, I hope you'll take it all very personally: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM
Fax: 515-255-8667
E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com