

THE NEVER ENDING STORY

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. **11** But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener,*

she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’¹⁶ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

(John 20:1-18, NRSV)

There’s a story about a Sunday School teacher who had just finished telling her third graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing the opening. Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, she asked, “What do you think were Jesus’ first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive?” The hand of a little girl shot up into the air. Leaping out of her chair she shouted out excitedly, “I know, I know!” “Good” said the teacher, “Tell us, what were Jesus first words.” And extending her arms high into the air she said: “TA-DA!” We gather this Easter morning to celebrate God’s ultimate “Ta-Da,” the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Recently I gave Matthew’s Cub Scout Den a tour of the sanctuary. As I walked them to the chancel steps a puzzled youngster pointed to the giant cross and asked, “Why do you have a big ‘t’ hanging up in your church?” “It’s not a ‘t’, it’s a cross,” I explained. “No it’s not,” the protesting Cub Scout shot back. “A cross has that guy on it.” I quickly responded, “That guy is Jesus and the cross you’re referring to is called a crucifix.” Thinking I had found a teachable moment I continued, “You see, Roman Catholics

emphasize the sacrifice of Christ, thus Christ remains on the cross. Protestants like us focus more on the resurrection and thus Christ is off the cross.” Assuming my thumbnail history of the cross had done the trick, I asked if there were any other questions only to hear the dismissive Cub Scout mutter under his breath, “It still looks like a ‘t’ to me!”

What do you see when you look at the cross? A mode of capital punishment or a nice design for jewelry? A symbol of faith or the letter “t”? Not only does the cross lend itself to various interpretations, but so does the empty tomb. How are we to respond to the empty tomb, the folded grave clothes, the missing body? Our responses today vary just as Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John's reactions varied on that first Easter morning.

How must they have felt? Tragedy upon tragedy, nothing normal, nothing expected happened all week. The joy of Palm Sunday quickly faded. The friendly crowds turned angry. And the Passover meal, instead of being a time of celebration, turned into a dreadful discussion of Jesus' broken body and spilled blood. During the prayer time in the Garden of Gethsemane everything, absolutely everything fell apart after Judas kissed Jesus and the soldiers led the Lord away. And then the unthinkable, the most horrendous moment of all when the Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross between two criminals. Tragedy upon tragedy, nothing expected happened all week. It seemed like the end of Jesus' story. The end.

And now this, the battered body of Christ missing, Mary Magdalene felt overwhelmed. Note that her first thought was not resurrection, but robbery. Sometime we can get so used to expecting the worst that when the best finally happens right in front of our faces, we quickly jump to the wrong conclusion. So Mary turned and ran as fast as she could to tell Peter and the other disciples the bad news

(which was in fact the best of all news—only no one had figured it out yet). Finding them behind locked doors, Mary blurts out the latest tragedy—the missing body of Jesus. Impetuously, Peter and John are off and running to see what all the hysteria was about.

The writer of the Gospel of John makes it quite clear that not one of them was expecting resurrection. Who can blame them after all they had seen?

John reaches the tomb first but freezes in his tracks, while Peter charges in ready for action. However, they find only the linen wrappings, the burial clothes, which once held Christ's body. At this point the text tells us that John believes on the basis of the empty tomb and the grave clothes. No such statement is made about Peter. His faith would only come later when he met the resurrected Christ face to face. And so the two men leave the gravesite together each with a different response. Peter puzzled. John amazed.

Notice the progression in the story. At first, from their perspective, Jesus has died and they are left with nothing more than a corpse in a tomb. Next Mary finds the stone rolled away and concludes that someone has stolen the body. The writer adds another piece of evidence to the empty tomb in the form of the grave clothes. Grave robbers would have stolen the body fully wrapped. Neither the grave nor death itself could hold Jesus prisoner. But as yet the last and ultimate clue has not been issued, until now.

Mary Magdalene stays behind. Once again, in tears she stands alone at the tomb. And then, she finds she is not alone after all. As she peers into the tomb a second time, she finds yet another surprise. This time it's two angels who ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" In other words, "Mary, Ta Da! Don't you get it? There's no reason to cry."

But Mary has become so numbed by her despair that these angels make no impression on her. She simply answers them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where to find him.” The words are hardly out of her mouth when Jesus appears behind her.

Just like the angels, Jesus asks, “Woman, why are you weeping?” And then with a half smile on his bearded face he adds, “Whom are you looking for?” as if to say, “Psst! Hey Mary! I’m the one you’re looking for. It’s me, Jesus, right behind you!” But Mary still doesn’t recognize him.

Can’t you just see Mary Magdalene, unable to look this stranger in the eye? Her tears trickle down as she averts her eyes, staring off into nowhere. Thinking Jesus is the gardener, Mary speaks the words that pierce her heart, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And then the man she thinks is the gardener unexpectedly speaks her name in a way that only Jesus could say it, “Mary.”

The moment she recognizes him, she spins around and blurts out, “Teacher!” She longs to hug him or kiss his feet, but Jesus tell her that she must not hang on to him. Instead, her mission is to go and tell the other disciples all that she has seen. With the darkness behind her, and the dawn before her, Mary sets off to share this startling good news.

Mary’s progression from fear to the new life of faith mirrors the experience of many people. At first, Mary remains trapped in the past, held back by unhealed tragedy and grief. Her wounded soul spiritually blinds her to the truth. When something better comes along Mary completely misinterprets it, mistaking resurrection for

robbery. Nonetheless, Mary demonstrates great courage when she chooses to have a second look. After facing hardships and defeat we must give life a second chance and Mary does so in a cemetery of all places. Because she doesn't give up and run away, Mary receives an amazing gift, only she does not recognize it at first. Jesus greets her and instead of seeing the risen Lord she only sees a gardener. I admire Mary's persistence, where Peter and John have already vacated the premises, she is determined to track down Jesus' body.

In her tenacious search and honest questions Mary's eyes are opened to the truth. Once she recognizes Jesus, she longs to freeze the moment in time. Once our eyes are opened to further truth and light we're tempted to think we've finally made it. We don't want things to change. We're content with the new status quo. And yet Christ calls us to keep moving. Ultimately Mary gets it. She understands the new responsibilities to which Christ beckons her. New Testament professor, Dennis Smith, puts it this way, "[Mary] now sees that [faith in the resurrection] is not a means of escape but is a means for redefining life in the present" (*The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, p. 177). Where one moment it seemed like the end of the story, the next moment it became obvious that the real story had only just begun.

What about us? Where are we in our faith journeys – befuddled like Peter, waiting for more evidence like Mary, or believing like John? Our responses to the risen Christ are as diverse and individual as each human life, yet today reminds us that what seems like the end may only be the beginning of something far better. When we hear the story of God's Easter miracle, we once again have the opportunity to be surprised by the sheer joy of good defeating evil, of life defeating death. The story of Easter is the never ending story of joy and the life and love that spring forth from it.

For despite life's unpredictable nature, our hopes rest secure in the hands of a God of surprises, a God who, in the twinkling of an eye, turned death into life, crucifixion into resurrection. After all, this is no mere "t", it is a cross—an empty cross that points to an empty tomb. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, who turns the shadows of Good Friday's death to the bright radiance of Easter Sunday's resurrection, we give you praise. Your Easter miracle offers us life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair, and joy in the face of sadness. May your life-giving Spirit open our eyes to the deep truth of your wondrous work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Offer new life we pray, to those places on earth where death and violence predominate. Offer new life we pray, to those places in our lives that seem dead and hopeless. Offer new life we pray, to your church that we might fulfill your mission for us.

And now, O God, send us forth this day with the miracle of Easter, the hope of new life deep down in our souls. Through Jesus Christ our risen Lord we pray. AMEN.