

“Turning Toward Christ”
 Acton Congregational Church (ACC)
 17 April 2022
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Text: John 20:1-18

“She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).”
 - John 20:16b

Prayer
Holy God,
We are gathered to listen to the startling news of the resurrection.
Make this day a step closer to a newer and fuller life
For all of us who, despite our doubts and skepticism,
Come to this gathering to let Easter happen in us and through our lives.
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, we make this prayer. Amen.

I spent the last few weeks wrestling with and agonizing over what words to use to welcome so many of you back to our pews this Easter morning. I am aware that a few of our church members and friends are not quite ready yet to worship in person or are physically unable to be in the sanctuary today, so they are joining us virtually. I want to say to all the virtual Easter worshippers, no matter who you are or where you may be on your faith journey, that I am delighted that you are part of this gathered community. But after two years of preaching in an empty church on one of the holiest days for Christians around the world, I was hoping to come up with something original and uplifting and eloquent, perhaps even memorable, to greet those of you who are here, taking up space in the pews. I thought inspiration was eluding me until last Sunday. I was standing by the parking lot circle, handing out palm fronds before the service when one of our church families arrived with their two children. I looked at their 3-year-old son and said, ***“Hey Xander, it’s good to see you.”*** Without missing a beat, Xander smiled and replied, ***“I know.”***

I was definitely not expecting that answer! Xander’s response caught me off-guard. His reply was disarmingly simple and yet it revealed such bold confidence in the words he heard.

“I know.” I will never forget the splendid simplicity and originality of this 3-year-old’s words. And I hope that each one of you, like Xander, knows with a deep spiritual knowing how good it is that we can see each other on this Day of Resurrection. It is good to welcome the Easter crowd back. I am grateful that I can see you in the pews, with your face masks on, safely gathered in this sacred room to remember the story at the heart of our faith that has drawn people from every continent, from hundreds of different nationalities and ethnicities, from diverse cultures, languages and backgrounds and across the centuries to the Church – this community of Jesus-followers where the

memory, the mystery, the possibility, the rumor of the resurrection is kept alive. Welcome back to the pews, friends!

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth served as a pastor in a small congregation for some 10 years before he became known as one of the greatest Protestant minds of the twentieth century. Reflecting on that time in parish ministry, Barth concluded that people come to church on Sunday morning maybe out of an old habit, perhaps in search of spiritual instruction, or they may be even seeking entertainment, but what most of them will not dare say out loud is that they also come with a question burning silently in their hearts, “**Is it true?**” Is what we say about the love of God revealed in the life of Jesus true? Is the resurrection more than a feel-good fairy tale where love always prevails in the end? Is there any truth to the story upon which our faith stands? Is the most important event in the life of Jesus real? Does Easter make any difference in our lives?ⁱ

The Gospel according to St. John says that Mary Magdalene also went to the cemetery on the first Easter Sunday in search of answers. She will not know it until much later, but Mary is one of the very first Easter worshippers. The Gospels do not all agree on the number of women who showed up at the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus’ body before the beginning of the Sabbath. In Matthew’s recollection of the story, Mary Magdalene and “**the other Mary**” made the journey to the graveyard together at first light.ⁱⁱ Mark remembers Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome taking spices to anoint Jesus’ body very early on the first day of the week after the sun had already risen.ⁱⁱⁱ In Luke’s recounting of Easter, the two Mary’s mentioned in Mark, Joanna and other women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem walked to the tomb at early dawn.^{iv} John puts the spotlight on Mary Magdalene who was among Jesus’ first followers and friends. Mary stuck with Jesus to the very end. When the male disciples abandoned Jesus and melted away, Mary stood with the other women on Mount Calvary.^v She was there when Jesus was nailed to the cross. Mary saw Jesus breathe out his last words from the cross, “**It is finished,**” bow his head and give up his spirit.^{vi} With a broken heart, Mary Magdalene watched when they laid Jesus in the tomb.^{vii} And, in John’s account, it was this faithful disciple and brave woman who went alone to Jesus’ grave while it was still dark with a question hitched to her heart, “**Is it true?**”

By the way, we’ve got to respect and admire the theological integrity and courage of the Early Church. The first Christians could have selected only one account of the resurrection, one Gospel, to be the Church-sanctioned version of the story that unites all followers of Christ. At the very least, the earliest Church Fathers could have done a little editing here and there to harmonize the discrepancies, fix the contradictions, and smooth over the disagreements among the Gospel writers. One coherent and consistent Easter story could have made the most important event in the Christian tradition a bit more palatable. Amazingly, rather than throwing all the Gospels into a scriptural blender to create a Gospel smoothie that is easy to swallow, the Early Church embraced the multiplicity of perspectives and the variety of memories in the four Gospels. They chose the real multi-voice Easter dialogue instead of a potentially more

believable monologue. In an unprecedented editorial decision for the time, the Early Church Fathers also retained the role of women as the primary witnesses to the resurrection. Non-Christians, especially in the second century when women were deemed unreliable eyewitnesses in a lawcourt, often ridiculed the story of the resurrection as nothing more than the confused and contradictory testimony of frightened and uneducated women. As embarrassing as it might have been for the first community of disciples, they refused to dismiss the experience of the women or file and polish the jagged edges of the four Gospels. They let the differing accounts stand side by side like tiny windows that open up to a truth larger than any one of the evangelists might be able to describe in a single recollection of the first Easter morning.

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb knowing only the dark reality of the crucifixion and the finality of death. She couldn't make sense of what had happened on Good Friday yet. She did not know how to move on with her life after seeing Jesus hanging on a Roman cross. For Mary, the cross was not a religious symbol, it was a grisly instrument of state-sponsored terror used in a very public ritual of torture and humiliation that magnified Caesar's control over the fate of every human life in his Empire until their very last gasp. When she followed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the last thought in Mary's mind was that he would be betrayed, arrested, judged, condemned to death and executed by the end of the week. On Easter morning, she was stunned, disoriented, and traumatized which, of course, was the purpose of the crucifixion, that is, to shock and silence people into submission.

It had been 72 hours, but Mary needed to go back to the garden where they laid Jesus' body to rest. Alone with her overwhelming sense of grief, I am sure Mary kept asking herself, "***Is this real?***" Everything felt like a bad dream for her. She had pinned her whole life and faith on that man from Nazareth. Mary believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ sent from God. She had given her heart to his teachings. She wanted to live in a world where the greatest commandment is not only to love God who you cannot see, but also to love our neighbors and even our enemies. Jesus had inspired Mary Magdalene to imagine a society where the poor would be lifted up, the hungry would have enough to eat, debts would be forgiven and the humble would inherit the earth. Like the other disciples, Mary also hoped that Jesus would bring God's Kingdom into human history and his followers would band together to heal the whole world. But the cross put an end to Mary's dream in the most devastating, disgraceful and heartbreaking way. Jesus was dead. His body gone. For Mary Magdalene, Easter Sunday did not begin with a rousing organ prelude or a trumpet blast; it started in the dark with heartache, loneliness, and despair hanging in the early morning air.

In John's Gospel, there is a lot of running, coming and going on Easter, as Peter and the other disciple did what they could to figure out what might have happened to Jesus' corpse. Peter had doubts. The other disciple believed. They both returned to the safety of their hiding place. It was not safe to be at the gravesite of a man who was crucified for treason. Mary however stayed in the garden weeping. The writer of John's Gospel wanted to make sure we understood the depth of Mary's emotions on that day.

Mary was not crying quietly and discreetly. The Greek verb John used in this passage describes a loud, uncontrollable, and visible expression of grief, sadness, loss, and emotional distress. Mary was wailing.

This is the kind of very deep human crying we see among Ukrainians caught between the tug of this ideological war between Russia and the West. A whole nation has been weeping for two months at the horror of the unspeakable brutality of the Russian military. Mary's visceral reaction to the violence of the Roman Empire is the same Palestinians feel in their bones every time Israeli forces demolish their homes, push them out of their ancestral land, and throw kids as young as 13 years of age into solitary confinement. Alone in the dark, Mary's loud and uncontrollable weeping probably sounded very much like the screams that mothers in Boston let out last January on a high school football field. Exhausted by the pandemic, overwhelmed by the disruptions caused by the Omicron wave, and anxious about their children's future, those mothers gathered in a circle and, for 20 minutes, they screamed and released all their frustration, anger, anxieties, fears, and pain into the crisp air of a winter night. One of our dear members who died last year told me that she locked herself in the bathroom and screamed out loud every time she went in for a check-up and the test results showed that the cancer was still spreading. Over the last two years, we all have collectively experienced the emptiness left behind by death. Some of us much more personally than others. We all have known the darkness of isolation. We all share the social and political trauma of the pandemic and have to face the harsh reality that, on this Easter morning, at least 200,000 U.S. children are missing a parent or guardian due to COVID. Sometimes, we too feel we need to scream out loud to let our emotions, our groaning out. Mary wept not just for herself but for everyone who knows what it is like to have their dreams crushed and their lives overtaken by the shadows of sorrow and death.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” A voice breaks through Mary's tears of sorrow and begins to reveal the mystery of this holy day. I love what Frederick Buechner said about this moment at the graveyard where Mary stood between the shifting emotions from *“Jesus is dead”* to *“He is risen!”* Buechner wrote, ***“The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, they reveal only... the gardener... But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and our imagination... what we may see is Jesus himself, what we may hear is the first faint sound of a voice somewhere deep within us saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives whether we can understand it or not.”***^{viii}

Resurrection was not what Mary Magdalene was expecting to experience at the doorway of the empty tomb. The very thought opposed common sense. In first century Palestine, people knew that the Romans were very efficient at killing whoever they nailed to the cross. The Gospel of John says that Mary turned around and only saw a gardener. Her imagination was still too small for the miracle of Easter. Then, something

else happened. Mary heard her name on the lips of the stranger she assumed might have stolen Jesus' body. It was as if the Risen Christ had said to her, "***Mary, it is good to see you.***" Oddly, the Gospel recounts Mary's reaction as if she had turned again to say "***Rabbouni***" - ***my Teacher.***" The problem is that Mary had already turned toward Jesus when he asked why she was crying, so she could not have turned a second time. John is playing with Greek verbs here. The same verb can be translated as "*physically turning*" or it can be used figuratively to describe the "*turning toward a new direction, a new perspective, a new awareness.*" When Mary felt the deep spiritual knowing that she was in the presence of the Risen Christ, Easter happened to her. She understood that something impossible, unthinkable, indescribable had happened that would change the direction of her life. Mary realized that her life had a new purpose. She knew that no words could possibly explain Easter, so Mary ran back to the disciples and said only what mattered, "***I have seen the Lord.***"

"Is it real?" Can we believe in the resurrection and new life in the world where sorrow, suffering, war, shootings, climate change, despair, cancer, COVID, and death still make so many of us worry, feel anxious, weep and grieve? Is our imagination big enough to entertain the possibility that Easter, this mystery we cannot put into a neat, coherent and believable story, is real and can give our lives a new purpose?

Last week, while I was listening to an old song performed by one of my favorite rock bands, U2, and composed by one of the greatest contemporary theologians, Bono, I experienced one of those everyday miracles Buechner described so eloquently. The title of the song is "*Walk On*" and here are some of the words Bono wrote:

***"And if the darkness is to keep us apart
And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off
And if your glass heart should crack
And for a second you turn back
Oh no, be strong.
Walk on, walk on...
You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been
A place that has to be believed to be seen...
Walk on, walk on."***^{ix}

I played the song a few times and it felt as if Bono were talking to me about Easter. No, resurrection does not seem possible at all in our world. We can't prove it ever happened. We cannot explain this mystery that is so central to our faith. The daylight of Easter still feels like it's a long way off. But if we turn to the Risen Christ. If we listen to the story with our whole being. If you allow our faith to pack our suitcase for a place none of us has been yet. If we give our hearts to the truth in the story, we will keep walking on to the place that has to be believed to be seen. Even in the midst of our messy world, even in the midst of darkness, if we turn to the Risen Christ and open our hearts to the deep spiritual truth of Easter, we will surely find a new direction and purpose for our lives. Like Mary Magdalene, though we may be emotionally wounded or

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

anxious or lonely or visibly sad or maybe even indifferent and skeptical and bored, if we dare to believe that Easter is real, we will keep walking on toward that new life of hope, of peace, of love, of justice, of purpose, of intentional work to mend and heal what is broken in our own lives and in our world.

“Is it true?” You are the only one who can answer this question. So, friends, walk on. Be strong. Believe that there is a light up on the horizon that is shining more brightly even now. See the glimmer of Easter in the shadows of the world. A new life is still possible. This world may crack and break your heart but hold on to that hope for a new life, give your own life to it, find your purpose in making Easter real. Turn to the Risen Christ and hear him say to you, ***“It’s good to see that you are still here hoping to believe even if you cannot see the full daylight of Easter yet.”***

Walk on, friends, don’t turn back, walk on toward resurrection! He is risen and if you turn to Christ, the Risen Lord will give your life a new direction!

Happy Easter! Feliz Páscoa! Alleluia!

ⁱ See Karl Barth in The Word of God and Theology, pp. 108-111, translated by Amy Marga.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 28:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 16:

^{iv} Luke 24:1, 10.

^v Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; John 19:25.

^{vi} John 19:30.

^{vii} Mark 15:47.

^{viii} Frederick Buechner in The Magnificent Defeat, pp. 87-88.

^{ix} “Walk On” Music by U2, Words by Bono, released in 2001.