

Jesus' Great Questions: For Whom are You Looking?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, UCC
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John 20:1-18

I have read that in the Easter story, as told in the Gospel of John, there has to be a naked gardener running around somewhere. Consider – Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday and discovers that it is empty. She runs back to tell the disciples what she has discovered. Peter and the beloved disciple – we believe it is John – dash to the tomb and go in. And what do they find? A pile of clothes on the floor – presumably Jesus' grave clothes. Then they discover the cloth that had covered Jesus head neatly rolled up and put away? Mary assumes someone has taken Jesus body. But why would grave robbers bother to undress him first and why take the time to go to all the trouble of rolling up the cloth? We are told that when the other disciple followed Peter into the tomb and saw the clothes, he believed. Believed what? John does not say. He simply believed and then, without a word to each other, both he and Peter returned home. They certainly seem underwhelmed by what they have seen – or not seen – in the tomb.

The rest of the story belongs to Mary. She is the one who saw the angels and she is the first to see the Risen Lord. But somehow, Jesus had gotten himself some new clothes, a gardener's clothes. So either these is a naked gardener hiding behind a tree somewhere or Jesus found an extra set of work clothes down by the rakes and fertilizer. Of all the things she expected, Mary never expected to see the risen Lord, especially dressed as a gardener. And she doesn't know who he is until he speaks her name.

We celebrate Easter with grand music and lilies and banners. But interesting how that first Easter was marked by confusion and skepticism on the part of all the eye witnesses. So if you come here today carrying a healthy load of skepticism about all the Easter stuff, you are not alone. Mary, when she finds the tomb empty, simply assumes someone has carried the body away. Even the appearance of angels does not change her mind. Then, when she actually sees the risen Jesus, she assumes he is the gardener, perhaps even the one who has made off with the body. The two disciples go into the tomb, one of them believes something, but they seemingly draw no conclusions and decide to go home for brunch. They believe that Jesus is, in the way of all mortals, dead and gone. With Jesus' death, as sad and tragic as it is, things have taken their ordinary, worldly course. Nothing in that graveyard but emptiness and absence. But, interestingly, the risen Christ does not rebuke Mary for her inability to recognize him, nor does he reject the disciples for their skepticism and failure of comprehension. Instead he asks, "Whom are you looking for?"

Not a bad question to ask on any Easter Sunday. Here we are today in our faith, here we are in our skepticism and doubt. Some of us are excited; some of us were dragged here by an over-enthusiastic family member. And yet, I suspect we also come with a certain yearning, an unspoken hope. As Bono of U-2 sings, "We still haven't found what we're looking for." We come wondering, in a broken and violent world, where everything seems to be going wrong, is it possible that something is going right? With death and the power of death all around us, can there really be a power that overcomes death? Here, today, it is possible we might catch a glimpse of a new reality, a hope that pulses just beyond the border of our everyday existence - that might redefine the meaning of our lives? Just who or what are we looking for?

A story shared by a colleague: "In August, Mary and John celebrated the birth of their first child. They had resigned themselves to never having children, but then, late into their marriage, they discovered they were going to have a baby. The news spread like wildfire through the congregation. Mary was pregnant! Soon she delivered a beautiful baby boy. But it was evident that the baby's legs were tiny, almost withered, out of proportion to his body. Eventually the doctor delivered the sad news: their son would never walk.

Continues the pastor, "We in the church continued to celebrate the wonder of this baby, but it was easy for us to celebrate because we didn't have the day-to-day care of him. Nor did we know what it was like to look into that crib, day after day, and to see into the future with a child who had been crippled from birth, a child who would never run or walk or live the life other children might live. Those cares began to show on Mary and John too. When people inquired about their son, or when the congregation made a fuss over him when they brought him to church, there was a tint of sadness in their eyes, a premonition of the life ahead for them and their new baby. Around the church people spoke in muffled tones of the "sadness of it all."

"But on Easter Sunday they came to church with the baby all dressed up in a new Easter outfit. Little Johnny was baptized that day, and when the service was over something was different. When

Mary discussed it later, with tears in her eyes she said that it was as if a door opened for her on that Easter and she saw a new way. It was as if, during that Easter baptism, God passed a blessing over Johnny's life and their lives. She now saw her son with new eyes, not as a burden, but as a blessing – a unique, undeserved and special blessing." For that family, it was nothing less than a new beginning, a new life emerging from the old, the power of death overcome by life. And if that isn't Easter, I don't know what is.

For whom – for what – are you looking? Someone to answer all your questions, a miracle worker, a problem solver, someone with the key to open the door to financial success, someone to remove all your fear and provide a fail-safe sense of security? I confess that it has been difficult to prepare an Easter sermon in this moment of history, because more and more people, even people of faith, seem so skeptical about Easter's hope, its promise. It certainly would seem that we live in a time when evil, untruth and fear rule the day. What is reality in 21st century America? Anxiety and fear are what we seem to know best in this young century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. Brussels, Paris, the Southern Sudan, Syria, San Bernardino, Sandy Hook School... from civilization itself to what seemed the most cherished values of the past, so much seems threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic and frightening news that even when the news is good, we cannot hear it, especially when we are surrounded by so many voices urging us daily to be afraid, be very afraid.

Except for this day. For this day, we pause and allow ourselves, almost in spite of ourselves, to hear another voice, a voice that says, "Do not be afraid. Rich one, poor one, child; sick one, dying one, cynical one, unbelieving one, frightened one, lost one – do not be afraid." For we live in a world where Easter happened, where resurrection happened, where new life happened – happens still – and the powers of evil and death can do nothing about it, cannot stop it, and certainly cannot keep it sealed in a tomb. Hope is not dead!

I know, what I am saying makes no sense, but that's precisely the point... there is nothing sensible about Easter, nothing sensible about resurrection. If you came here today looking for sensible, you came to the wrong place. But I don't think that is what you are looking for. No, I think you want to meet One who cannot be contained or confined, a God of abundant life and love, stronger than any death, who has decided to thrust God's way into the world in a most unexpected, even unimaginable way, a God who is only too happy to dismantle all our preconceptions and certainties and redefine for us what is real. But, if we meet such a God, or such a God meets us, what are we going to do about it?

It's an old story: A mother takes her young son to his very first swimming lesson. Just before the lesson begins, she tells him. "Now don't you dare go near the water until you have learned how to swim!" Well, that's not exactly the way swimming lessons work, and sitting on the sidelines, or on the edge of the pool, is not the way we learn about Easter. To discuss endlessly the details of Easter is to miss Easter. It is not about asking discussing details, but about daring to jump in and live new lives, allowing our expectations and assumptions about life to be changed along the way. The point is not to talk about Jesus but to risk our lives on what he said and on the sort of life he lived. That's where the miracle happens – not so much in the tomb, but in our encounters with the Living Lord right here, right now. Is your life at a dead end? You can begin again if you believe in the God who on Easter proclaims, "I can make all things new." For someone in the throes of divorce or touched by the heartache of death or bogged down in a life that seems to lack purpose or meaning or who finds himself or herself at the very perimeter of life, Easter comes as a way from darkness to light, always with the assertion, 'Because Christ lives, I can live also... and so can my world.'

As a Christian and a pastor, I do not say this with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well, but as one who has faced the darkness, who has suffered unspeakable loss, and has known, in one way or another what it is like to feel separated from God. I know what it is to be gripped by a nameless fear at 3:00 in the morning. And yet, through it all, I have found, often to my complete surprise, that I am not alone. The Risen One has been there, assuring me that in the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor, death is not the end. The end is life – his life and our lives through him, in him. Something larger and stronger than me in in charge, even in a world that seems to have gone crazy. Truth and goodness and love are the final realities. So I refuse to give in to fear or despair, even as they sit like black crows on my shoulder. For I have been shown that existence truly does have greater depths of beauty, mystery and hope than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. So dare to dream it, dare to believe it; dare to live it. And along the way, don't forget to speak to the gardener.