

“Why Are You Weeping?” / John 20:1-18 / Easter, 20 April 2014

Happy Easter to you! Whoever you are, whatever your story, know on this resurrection morning that there is an all-transforming Mystery running free in our world. It is joy that overcomes sorrow, deep peace that quiets all anxieties, perfect love that casts out fear. It is life that even death cannot finally supplant. You don't have to understand it. In fact, at times you won't even believe in it. But this Mystery's power will not be limited by disbelief or by death. Only may God give us eyes to see it when it's standing right in front of us! Resurrection is easy to overlook when we're willing to settle for so much less.

For my fourth birthday, my babysitter got me a dog. Now, in retrospect and as a parent, I can see why my own father never took to my little dog. Dad already had a Great Dane named Baron von Bruno, a massive, slavering hulk of an animal that my brothers and I used to ride like a pony—a very agile pony that, well as I said, slobbered. Two dogs was really too many for a family of seven in a three bedroom house, especially since one of those dogs was the size of a timber wolf. It didn't help that my babysitter, whose name was Debbie, didn't bother to ask my parents' permission before showing up at my birthday party and presenting me with a dog. I know now that you never give a kid an animal unless the kids parents approve. But when you're four, you see a puppy, you're in love. I named the dog “Pooch” because, well, it means “dog.” I learned the word from some Scottish neighbors. And I loved that dog with all the ability a four-year-old child has to love anything—the reckless, unguarded kind of love that hasn't yet tasted loss of any kind, or betrayal, or the death of any loved one.

Pooch was a mutt of the highest order. He looked something like a cross between a beagle and some sort of terrier. And he definitely had the musky smell of a beagle. He was black and white, low to the ground, and fast! My grandfather worked at Pennzoil, so he brought a fifty-five gallon oil drum home from work, which I turned over on its side and stuffed with straw to make an outdoor home for Pooch. Summer and winter, Pooch was staked out in the yard near his oil drum, except when he broke loose, which was most of the time. Pooch loved nothing more than to sneak into the house and terrorize the furnishings. In my dining room in South Fayette, you can still see Pooch's toothmarks on the legs of the china cupboard and the buffet that were handed down to me from those days. He ate anything that was left laying about, and most of those things made him sick. But like most of us, Pooch preferred to be sick indoors. In fact, he liked to do many inappropriate things indoors. He tore up the carpet and pulled at curtains until the rods fell off the wall. He teased Baron von Bruno and ran circles around the bigger dog. And after wreaking whatever havoc possible inside the house, like the brigand that he was, Pooch would flee down the main street of town faster than any of us could catch him. Pooch was a holy scourge.

Yes, now that I'm a father and a homeowner, I can see why my parents never cared for Pooch. He was...excitable. But, much to my parents' dismay, Pooch never forgot the way back home once he escaped, and he came back when he got hungry. Except one time. One time, Pooch managed to pull his little doghead right out of his collar and tore off down the street, and he didn't come back. The hours trickled into days, and the days into about a week. By the time this happened, I was seven years old, and Pooch's reign of terror had already lasted three years. If anything, I was more attached to him than ever. We looked everywhere for that dog, at neighbors' houses, along the roads, in the woods, the fields, the strip mines. He was nowhere to be found. And with time, I started to lose hope that he would ever be coming home.

Now there was on the edge of that little town a rundown farmhouse with not a speck of paint on its gray, weathered boards. Inside that house, there lived an old man whom all children feared. I don't know why we were scared of him; I guess because his house looked haunted. The yard was filled with rusting farm equipment, and dead vehicles, and barking dogs. About a dozen dogs, all of them staked out in different parts of the yard, and all of them barking. My brothers and I walked past that spooky house with its angry dogs at least half a dozen times in search of Pooch. And we never noticed him

there on a chain amidst all the other dogs, barking for our attention. We kept walking right past him until a neighbor telephoned and told us that she'd seen him there. The old man proved to be not so scary. He said, "Oh, I just take care of these stray dogs till their owners come and find them."

Pooch and I were reunited, but not because I found him...though I'd walked right past him so many times. We were reunited because it took outside eyes to see him there amongst all the other dogs in a place where I was scared to look. Well, the joyful reunion was shortlived. We moved into the city shortly thereafter, and Pooch went to live with an Amish family. I have, famously, never loved a dog since. The funny thing is that the last time I ventured back to the little town, I thought I saw Pooch running free down the main street. My heart leaped for just a moment until I remembered that dogs don't live for forty years. It was a dog that looked very much like him. My point is this: Sometimes we don't even find the things we're looking for because we lack the courage to believe that we will find them. There are times when we are so blinded by our sadness, or our loss, or even just our search itself, that we overlook the very thing we've set out to find, though it's right in front of us. Or, as in the case of Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning, we cannot see the risen Jesus through our tears for the crucified dreams, for the shattered hopes, for...the dead Jesus. But there he is!

The four gospels all differ in their descriptions of that first Easter, but all four name Mary Magdalene as the first eyewitness to the resurrection. In John's account, both the angels at the tomb and the risen Christ ask Mary the same question. "Woman, why are you weeping?" It's not a very good question, really. Given the horrors that she's seen since this past Thursday night, poor Mary might remain haunted by post-traumatic stress disorder for many years to come. She might be subject to little episodes of weeping for decades. Besides, we know why Mary's weeping. She's shedding tears that you and I blink back from time to time, at the pain of a friend, or when we're reading the news or listening to the radio. Mary's are the tears of hopes crucified. She's weeping for the world such as it is. She weeps for the great, blood-soaked sweep of human history, for Dresden, and Hiroshima, and Darfur. She could be weeping because she knows that yesterday was the nineteenth anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing—fittingly enough on Holy Saturday. She's weeping for the violence and the inhumanity there in the streets of Jerusalem and here still in our city streets and school corridors today. She's weeping for the injustice in the courts of power where money rules. She's weeping because her hopes for a new and a better world have been put to a cross and buried. She's weeping because she lives in a world that crucifies its best and its wisest dreamers and reserves power for those who are egotistical enough to seek it. She's weeping the tears that you and I occasionally stifle ourselves, tears of frustration, and anger, and sorrow. Mary's weeping because she's been to Golgotha, where dreams go to die. She's weeping because she doesn't recognize the resurrected Jesus right in front of her. Oh, we know why Mary's weeping. The question is, Why are you weeping?

We all come to church this Easter morning with a variety of conflicting things going on inside of us. Our deep longing for joy and for springtime itself runs up against the crises and demands of life. The tulips, and violins, and trombones all join in concert with the warming earth and the budding world to proclaim a message of new life on this Easter day. And yet, each of us—every last one of us—knows by heart the well-worn paths through the gardens of our spirits. They're secret paths that we usually walk alone, making our way early and often to the tombs where we go to weep. Old failures, or losses, or fears. Old habits that we cannot seem to kick. Old doubts that just won't go away. Fears for ourselves, fears for loved ones, fears for tomorrow. We've all got our garden tombs. And if habit, or impulse, or longing brought you to church this Easter morning, it's because something in you hopes and maybe even knows that resurrection can happen in our lives and in our world.

Sometimes you fail to recognize a person when you see him or her outside the regular context. I think I've told you the three cardinal rules of religion: Jews don't recognize Jesus as the Messiah; Protestants don't recognize the Pope as the head of the church; and Baptists don't recognize each other in the liquor store. In fact, there are times out there in the world when I come across people I know very well here in church. But if I see them in a hardware store or a museum (not to say the liquor

store), I might think to myself for just a moment, “I know that person...I know that person. Who is that person?” Mary Magdalene is weeping because she's seen violence and destruction and the death of a dream, but resurrection? Resurrection was a promise that Jesus whispered, but something she'd never really seen, at least not in the place where she expected death. It's no wonder she can't recognize it standing right in front of her. This is the strange conundrum of faith: all of life and hope hinges on resurrection. It's our story, and we know we're going to hear about it every Easter. Easter is one of those Sundays when we come knowing exactly what to expect. There will be lilies, and there will be horns and strings. There will be jubilant hymns and a sermon about, well, resurrection. It's easy to recognize resurrection here in church. It comes as a story. It comes as a song. It comes as a stirring promise. But will we recognize resurrection a week from now when we're still making sandwiches out of the leftover ham, and when the daffodils have mostly faded, and when the notes of the triumphant music have long since been silenced? When faced with meetings, and deadlines, and headlines, and schoolyard bullies, will we remember that resurrection abounds in each new moment that we borrow breath from our Creator, that resurrection is the potential of each new moment to embrace what is good, what is beautiful, and what is true?

There is resurrection all around us. It comes as healing. It comes as forgiveness. It comes as a gentleness in a place where you expected conflict. It comes in the night when no one is looking. Resurrection is God's very life being lived out in our world. It picks up the scattered pieces, all the broken shards of human injustice, and violence, and shame, all the wreckage of our history on this planet. Resurrection is God's life itself, taking all our brokenness into those scarred hands, tenderly blessing it, and making of it new life, new possibility, new hope. Of course we'll fail to recognize resurrection when it's standing right in front of us. Of course we will, because we're not usually looking for anything quite so lofty. Most of the time, we just want to feel safe, at least, or productive at best. Most of us just want to avoid too much pain for ourselves and those we love. Of course we'll fail to see resurrection; we're looking for so much less.

Sometimes we simply aim too low—as our recent capital campaign proved to us when we far exceeded our initial goal. A story is told about President Calvin Coolidge. He was a deep thinker but not much of a talker. People called him “Silent Cal.” Once a wealthy woman was seated next to him at a dinner party, and she said, “I know you don't like to talk, but I've bet my friend that I can get more than two words out of you this evening, so why don't you say something for me, Mr. President?” Coolidge smiled at the woman and simply said, “You lose.” I think we ask too little sometimes. When Mary made her way to the garden tomb, she would have settled for a corpse to wash in perfume. She would have settled for just one last glimpse of her dead friend. She was so willing to settle for death that when she saw resurrection standing right in front of her, she didn't recognize it for what it was. New life is the promise, in this world and the next, but you have to look for it. You have to insist on it. You have to give it a chance to introduce itself. Resurrection comes from the outside, but once you've seen it in yourself, in your attitudes, in your relationships, in your mental and physical health—then you can participate with it, planting and sowing resurrection in our world of weeping Marys.. Old relationships that have been broken so long no one even remembers why: if you approach them with the expectation of wholeness, sometimes they can be restored. Resurrection! Old hurts that somehow have a way of becoming fresh and new: when you come at them not with mute acceptance but with the hope of wellness, they can finally be healed. Old fears that live with you like an unwanted pet: when you come to them looking for resurrection, they too can be banished. Resurrection is the very life of God being lived out in each moment or every day, working for renewal and wellness in our spirits and in our world. We can take part in it, but first we have to recognize it.

“Why are you weeping?” the angels ask Mary. “Why are you weeping?” the risen Lord asks Mary. We know why she's weeping. She's weeping for good reason. She's weeping because she doesn't recognize resurrection when she sees it. There is a Mystery running free in our world, usually unnoticed. It pulses silently through all the moments of your life, working pain into strength, sorrow

into patience, loss into wisdom and grace. It is the sweet chord of hope that keeps you aware that life is good, love is real, and dreams are worth pursuing. Resurrection is afoot, striving to bring new life out of all our old deaths. Whatever situations you face when you return to your world today, know this: It might look like the gardener, but it's not! Resurrection is standing right there in front of you. Only God give us eyes to see it. Amen.