

## “From certainty to openness”

1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18 (April 17, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Seven weeks ago we entered the season of Lent. We began a series of sermons that focussed on *our* way versus *God’s* way. We said we wanted to move from one to the other – from living the way *we* want, to living more and more the way *God* wants. We do that by focussing on Jesus.

Today, Jesus has centre-stage. This morning is the highest holy day of the Christian year, the biggest festival, the most wonderful celebration. It’s Easter!



Easter is a day that challenges the way things are. It demolishes our certainties and opens us up to fresh new possibilities.

Just when you thought the game was over: Jesus dead, the disciples scattered, the program finished ... No more miracles, no more teaching, no healing, no feeding – no more anything ... The religious leaders and the civil authorities, and those dark powers that seem to always win, lined up against him.

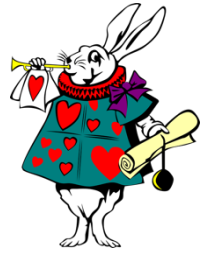
They crucified Jesus. They killed him. We saw it happen with our very own eyes. Well, no one disputes that! Jesus died. His body was buried. A heavy stone was rolled in front of the tomb. End of story. It’s time for us to pack our bags and go home, I guess. Or is it?



I think Easter is God’s great wild card. The card that stays hidden in God’s hand until one day it gets played, and it takes everyone by surprise. Wild cards are unpredictable. They’re disrupters. They change the course of the entire game. Which can be quite unsettling.

We like to think we have things figured out. We crave predictability, reliability. Certainty. These are things we depend upon. If I throw a ball in the air I need to know that it will land. If I heat a kettle on the stove I want to know that it will boil. If I sit on a chair I want to believe that it will hold me. (Most of the time.)

Have you ever read Lewis Carroll's books about Alice in Wonderland? They show us a world where all such predictability is gone. Nothing is as it seems. Everything's topsy-turvy and upside down. And poor Alice can barely navigate.



We can't live in a world that's unpredictable. There has to be some order in the universe, certain things we can rely upon.



But what if our supposed "certainties" are not all that certain? It's important to temper our knowledge with some humility. I remember telling a church official, outside of the congregation I served, what was clearly the best path forward for our people. But he drew me up short. "How do you know that," he said. "What makes you so smart?" And he was right.

Easter tells us we don't know it all. God always has the final word.



Some of our certainties may actually tie us up in knots: "I'm *certain* I can't do that sort of thing." Is that right? Are you sure? "I could *never* go in that direction." Really? Never is a very long time. "Impossible," we say. But these so-called certainties can become a tomb that shuts us in and smothers us. Our doors are locked. Our future is finished. End of discussion, right? Well, you know what *God* says to that!



Easter is the movement of our lives from these false certainties to the open-ended visions of resurrection life. But easter can be a long slow process.

It was the first day of the week, early in the morning, when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb and found the stone removed. "What's this?" she wondered. And ran to tell the others: "They've taken away the Lord. And we don't know where they've laid him."



Peter and another disciple went running to the tomb to see for themselves. When they arrived, all out of breath, they found the linen wrappings. And the covering that would have been laid on Jesus' face, neatly rolled and set aside.

Oh, and no body! Who could explain it?



At this point the gospel writer John, tells us that the other disciple saw and believed. But *what* he believed, we're not so sure. Maybe now, finally, he believed Mary's story. The body simply wasn't there. So those two disciples decide to leave. They turn around, shrug their shoulders, and head back home for breakfast. Clearly, for them, the full force of Easter has not yet arrived.

But look what Mary does. She does *not* go home. She lingers at the door of the empty tomb and pauses to have a second look. And when she does she discovers two angel messengers. And then she hears a voice. And turns around. And sees a person whom she believes to be the gardener.



Now there are *two* things here that I think are crucial to this story. Things that make all the difference for Mary. And all the difference for us as well. Two things: She lingers at the tomb, and she encounters the risen Christ.

First the lingering. Unlike those other two disciples, Mary doesn't rush to leave. She gives it time. She stays in place. She knows that something significant is happening, though she can't put her finger on what it is. Not yet. There are mysteries here we do not understand.

Mary's shows us how to stick *with* our questions and not throw in the towel, or say "I give up. It's impossible. We can never know."

Of course we may never *fully* know— what does Paul say? We only know in part. This side of heaven's glory, there will always be much that remains a mystery. But maybe we can know some things.

Don't be quick to leave. Stick around. Keep wrestling with those doubts and questions and misunderstandings. Because you never know when a voice may speak, and suddenly all will become *clear*.

So ... Don't run away. Hang in there. I think that's the *first* thing this passage teaches us.



And what comes after that is the greatest thing of all! It's an *encounter* with the risen Lord!

Christ is risen. This living God is in our world and among us. And if we are patient, and open to receive him – this Christ, the maker of heaven and earth, will come to us and reveal himself to us. What was it Jesus said? "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." (John 16:15-17) ... Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (John 14:21)

This is what makes all the difference! A person who calls themselves Christian is not one who has all the answers. (In fact, people like that scare me!) A person who calls themselves Christian is a person who knows the living Lord. A person who's hung around long enough to hear a voice, to form a relationship. A person who allows themselves to be *loved* by the God of heaven and earth.



Martin Schongauer, Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene, c. 1480-1490

“Mary!” says Jesus. All it takes is one word. And that word becomes the moment of recognition. As soon as she hears it, Mary knows in her heart of hearts who it is. It’s a voice as familiar as her very own. She never expected to hear it again. But there it is: naming her, addressing her, reaching out to her, embracing her.



How long have *you* been waiting? Have you heard it, yet? Would you like to? Again, the trick is simply to be open. Don’t close the door, or write off the possibility. Rather be patient, open your soul, lower your guard, be ready for an encounter.

Not that we can ever predict how or when it may happen. Or what it will look like when it does. These things are not ours to control. And please note: Just because *we haven’t* heard the voice doesn’t mean that Jesus isn’t with us. He is in the garden with Mary, whether she recognizes him or not! Sometimes I think we’re just oblivious.

In fact, our secular world conditions us *not* to see such things. The philosopher, Charles Taylor, notes in his book, *A Secular Age*, that one of the features of our time is to assume the physical world is all that there is.<sup>1</sup>

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,” says Paul, “we are of all people most to be pitied.” There is more to life than the things of this earth. And always *more* than meets the eye!



It’s a holy *encounter* that transforms Mary. She’ll never be the same again. She runs back a second time with a message for the disciples.

Because of this encounter, Mary Magdalene becomes the bearer of Good News. Church tradition has called her the “apostle to the apostles.” She’s the first one to proclaim the

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<sup>1</sup> **L. Gregory Jones: Living Easter Hope**, <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/6241bf586615fbf4940000be/1-gregory-jones-living-easter-hope>, Accessed April 13, 2022.

Easter message. To bear witness to Christ and his living presence in the world. What an honour!  
What a day!



It's a wild card, isn't it, this Easter story. This resurrection life. Something that defies our death-dealing certainties. Something that causes us to re-evaluate: What is happening? Who are we? Who do we belong to? What are we called to do next? Easter breaks open the tomb and points the way to God's new life.

From certainty to openness. From all our can nots and will nots and nevers – to love and hope and a new way forward. From endings to beginnings. From minds that are closed to hearts that are open. From a band of disciples, defeated, discouraged, on the verge of disbanding – to a fledgling community of faith beginning to find their way.



Can we find *our* way? All I know is that Christ is risen. His presence is as real in our world today as it was 2,000 years ago. He is here, whether or not we realize that. And listen! Can you hear something? I think it may be Jesus! And I think he is calling our name.