“Not containable”

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John 20:1-18

March 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday

***John 20:1-18***

***20 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’s 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.***

***11But 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.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, “Do not touch 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.’ ” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.***

*(If there are kids, start with reading from book and coloring pages [books?] .)*

The best part of my job is when I get to talk with you one on one or in small groups. I feel like I have been invited to a feast that *your* heart has prepared. I don’t know what will be served. I enter these conversations hungry to take in what you would give to me.

It’s during these conversations that I get to hear perspectives other than my own. Mostly the subject matter is church stuff or faith stories or faith questions. A common question is “Is [blank] true?” As tempting as it might be to answer with a firm “yes” or “no,” that might not be the best response. So much of what we as individuals come to believe depends on where we entered our particular narrative of faith. Much like becoming a Giants fan during a winning World Series year colors all of our future expectations of this team, the atmosphere and setting of our first steps into the Christian story will color all of our expectations of Church. No matter where you are in your faith journey we are happy that you are here, or on line, to share this Easter experience with us here at Bethany and we invite you to return.

Today’s scripture text is a pretty dramatic place to enter one’s faith journey. The amazing thing about Easter is only amazing because of what came before.

During Holy Week Jesus was hailed as he entered Jerusalem, but the week went downhill from there. Finally, Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples and told them to repeat this meal in memory of him, and then he washed their feet. Eventually wrongly imprisoned, he suffered the terrible death of a criminal, being hung on a cross to die. This weekend of Holy Week is usually spent in quiet reflection on all of the emotions – sadness, terror, disappointment, confusion – that people felt. But on the third day after Jesus’ death, this day, Mary, obviously a morning person came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. She came while it was still dark. O-dark-hundred as my family would call it. The gospel of John is one that uses symbolism and metaphor more than any other gospel writer. Coming to the tomb while it was still dark reminds us that we often and appropriately come to something important in that un-enlightened state of confusion, worry, or curiosity.

The first thing she notices is that the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb has been removed. Unlike other gospel version of this part of the story that have three women coming to the tomb for the purpose of completing the ritual anointing of a dead body, and then encounter angels, in this version Mary is alone, without ritual oils, and leaves right away without encountering anybody at first. She runs back to where the other disciples have been staying – in an upper room, fearing for their lives, hiding from the same authorities that killed Jesus – and Mary tells them that the stone has been rolled away and Jesus’ body is gone! Simon Peter and another disciple have this almost comical foot race – one got there first but didn’t go in right away he just looked in, the other got there second, but went in. Mary must have ran back with them, and stayed outside the tomb at first. What the first two disciples saw was that the body was gone. They knew they were at the correct tomb because the linen wrappings were still there, and one of the wrappings was rolled up near the others. Too neat to be the work of grave robbers. Then they believed, even though they did not yet understand.

If our scripture for today stopped right there, that would be plenty. When it comes to any faith, and for us our Christian faith, none of us walked up to a church and got it, all in one fell swoop. How many of us had all kinds of thoughts about faith at one point – maybe one or more, or none of these: Confusion, amazement, gratefulness, rejection, skepticism, peace, or another feeling. How many of us reached a point where we believed part of it even though we couldn’t understand it? That is so normal. It makes total sense to have questions and doubts, find answers and then have even more questions. A life of faith is just that – a *life* of faith. Not just a day, or a one week seminar, or the perfect book. It takes a lifetime. We’re never done. We have moments of “ah ha” or relief or comfort, or moments of feeling like we deeply feel God around and in us. A life of faith is more about constantly paying attention and responding to God’s work than it is about actually knowing things. At the same time, what we come to know supports how we respond to God’s work. In the midst of that we too find ourselves in the position of believing before we understand.

The disciples returned home, maybe flabbergasted, maybe to try to talk amongst themselves and try to understand. Imagine that conversation – especially Peter. Fresh off of his betrayal and abandonment of Jesus, he must have felt so many confusing feelings at the thought of Jesus being alive! But Mary stayed. For her, all she could do was weep. Weeping is something that speaks volumes when there are no words. Sometimes it’s joyful weeping, but here, Mary must be “all full up.” One of Jesus’ closest companions, her grief at his death must have been tremendous. Maybe her tears were also expressing the feeling of being stunned too. When we’re feeling up in the air about something, often we don’t know where to land emotionally. The tears encompass that feeling too. All we can do is guess. We don’t have anything written about how Mary felt just then. What we do have are examples of when Jesus wept, giving kind of a divine thumbs up to expressing deep emotions through tears. In Luke 19, we are told that before Jesus rode into Jerusalem for the sabbath that final time he wept. “**41**As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it.” The gospel of John tells us that Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died, out of compassion and love for his dear friends who were sorrowing (John 11). Mary stood outside the tomb weeping.

When she did look in, she saw two angels. They asked her why she was weeping. Because they have taken Jesus’ body, she tells them. Turning around, outside the tomb, a man she assumes to be the gardener asks her also, “Why are you weeping?” Mary replies to him,*“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”*

**And here’s the Easter moment for me. Jesus calls her by name. “Mary.”**

Let’s take a second and try something. I am going to ask you to say your own name out loud. Pretend this is Jesus saying your name. You can close your eyes, you can stare at the window, you can make this a prayer. When I say “go” I want everyone to say their own name out loud, at the same time. What would it be like if Jesus called you by name? Go.

That is what the resurrection means. It means that God knows your name, calls your name, all the time. Jesus the man who did not live to a ripe old age like Abraham, the man called the Son of David, the one people had been waiting for – died at the age of 33. He died a horrible death, people felt the shock and sorrow and rage and fear. But early in the morning, while it was still dark, the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty!

I don’t know if you have noticed the wonderful cover to today’s bulletin. This drawing that Hudson Valine has agreed to share with us is Easter in a nutshell. What is the most helpful is the arrows. We all need directions! Notice Jesus didn’t go from the cross to heaven. Can you follow the arrows? I’d really like Hudson to come up here and take my place from time to time and teach us how to remember the memorable parts of our faith. Wouldn’t it be great to hear about faith from Hudson, Abby, Hank, Gabriela, Lilian, Sallie and Caiti. Think of the shining facets on the diamond of faith that would be added to our current views.

Easter is celebrated as a day today, but in the church calendar Eastertide is the full 50 days between now and Pentecost. We will have that much time to share more about the fullness of today’s Easter moment. On future Sunday’s we will read scripture that picks up where today’s text leaves off. Mary must have wanted to run and hug Jesus and hold on tight – he’s back! But Jesus went from the cross to the tomb, back to earth for some post-resurrection visits, and finally his final retreat from us here on earth to go be with God, leaving us with the Holy Spirt in his stead. The text today ends on a cliff hanger – Mary can’t hold onto Jesus – neither can we. We can’t plant Jesus in just one place, just where we are, Jesus came for the world. Mary Magdalene, the first preacher, ran to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!" Thus beginning the most amazing ride humans have ever been on.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Amen.