

Easter is Not Gone

An Easter Message from Bishop Peter Rogness, South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, ELCA



Thank you to artist, Paul Oman, for the gift of his artwork.

Gospel: John 20:1-18

¹Early 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' 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 hold on to 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.

I'll come back to this gospel reading... but later...

Of all the days we have been told we cannot gather as church, Easter is the hardest of all – the day when churches are full, families are together, lots of special preparations have been made, special music, special flowers, special foods, and then family gatherings besides. And after a month of this isolation, it's wearing us down.

But this Sunday *is* Easter!

And just as we often see things in Scripture in some circumstances that we haven't seen before, let's celebrate Easter this week, and be open to things that maybe haven't struck us before.

My dad was a parish pastor for 20 years, loved preaching. He was, I think, very good – he published several books of sermons and was highly sought after as a speaker. I think preaching was always his first love. Then for the next/last 20 years of ministry, he was president of the seminary, a guest preacher often but not in his own parish. He retired in 1974, about the time I was beginning in ministry. A few years later he and mom were coming to spend the Easter holiday with us in Milwaukee. I was pastor of a small city church on the north side, which meant I did all the Palm Sunday/Maundy Thursday/Good Friday stuff, and since he was coming for Easter, I invited him to be our Easter preacher, which he was. (And, of course, he was very good!!)

We were sitting around the Easter dinner table as a family, and at the end of dinner he lit up his pipe as we had dessert, and I asked him "Dad, when was the last time you preached on Easter Sunday?" He thought a minute... puffed on his pipe a couple times... and finally said "I don't suppose I've preached on Easter since I left the parish in Sioux Falls, 1954." And I was feeling all proud of myself as a really thoughtful, caring son who had given his pulpit to his retired father who loved preaching...

Dad took a couple more puffs, and then he said, "You know, I never much liked preaching on Easter!" Talk about popping my inflated ego balloon in a hurry!

Then he went on to explain: We have had a whole season to build up to this moment, the resurrection; we read these great gospel accounts of the earth-shattering event of Jesus being raised; we prepare special music, flowers fill the place, everyone wears their finest, the every-Sunday people are there, the every other Sunday people are there, the once-a-monthers are there, the Easter/Christmas people are there... and they all know the story they're there for. And then the preacher has to get up and talk for 15-20 minutes, and the real challenge is to not take away from the moment and the story that is surrounding them on all sides!

He was right about that, of course. You wouldn't be tuning in to this sermon if you didn't have that core belief that on that Easter Morning, something astounding happened. It's at the core of our faith: no matter how you envision it happening, the fact is that this is the moment where we hang our belief that the God who has given life to each one of us, is a God who doesn't ever let go of us, not in this life, not beyond. It's the moment that proves, as Paul says in Romans, "nothing can separate us from the love of God..."

This year we hear this story knowing that a sizeable piece of life as we know it has been ripped away from us. The social interaction that has been a part of our rhythm of life since birth has now been replaced by "social distancing." We celebrate God's power over all things, not only death and the grave, but everything that takes away from the fullness of life here and now. And when we can't be with others, something of the "fullness of life" seems to have been pulled away from us!

How do you proclaim the great Easter message of resurrection, of God overcoming the worst the world has to give... when we're hunkered down because of what's happening in the world *this* Easter.

Well, let's go back to the gospel lesson. Years ago I read a piece by Frederick Buechner that gave me insight into that first Easter in a way I hadn't thought of before... he was seeing Easter through the experience of Mary Magdalene, whom John says was the first to see Jesus...

Mary Magdalene appears several times along the way in the gospels, one of the women around Jesus. Tradition says she was a prostitute; maybe so – in any event, she had been through troubles and evil spirits, teamed up with Jesus early on, and stayed with him to the end, and beyond;

It's at the end that we see her best. She was one of them who was there with Jesus at the crucifixion – she had more courage than most of them – and she was also there when they put what was left of him in the tomb. But the time you see her best was on that first Sunday morning after his death.

John is the one who gives the greatest detail, and according to him it was still dark when she went to the tomb to discover that the stone had been rolled away and the inside was empty. She ran back to wherever the disciples were hiding to tell them, and Peter and one of the others ran back with her to check out her story. They found out it was true, that there were only a few pieces of cloth laying there, and they left – nothing they could do there. Mary simply sat down, John says, and wept.

Two angels came and asked her what she was crying about, and she said "Because they have taken away my lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." She wasn't thinking about anything miraculous, in other words – she was simply thinking, in the midst of her own pain and loss, that even in death they wouldn't leave him alone, and that someone had stolen his body.

Then another person came up to her and asked her the same questions. Why was she crying? What was she doing here? She decided it must be somebody in charge, like the gardener maybe, and she said if he was the one who had taken the body would he please tell her where it was so she could go there.

Instead of answering her, he spoke her name – Mary – and then she recognized who he was. And, in one sense, from that moment forward the whole of human history was changed. But for Mary Magdalene, the only thing that had changed was that, for her, for reasons she couldn't begin to understand, her old teacher and friend and right arm was alive again! RABBONI!! she shouted, and was about to throw her arms around him when he stopped her:

"Do not touch me" he said. Do not hold on to me. And in that moment, she was not only the first person in all history to have her heart miss a beat for the news that he was alive again... but she was also the first person to have her heart break because he couldn't be touched anymore, she couldn't hold his hand anymore when the going got tough, she couldn't weep on his shoulder anymore...because the life in him wasn't a life she could know by touching it anymore. From now on - his was a life she would know by living each day knowing he wasn't gone, that he was still alive, still with her, still able to lift her out of the wreckage of her life.

And that was enough, more than enough. It didn't take long for it to sink in. She left the place immediately and sent to tell the disciples to report "I have seen the Lord!" and any doubts they might have had were very likely erased the minute they took one look at her face!

What they saw there was Mary Magdalene transformed! – never to be alone again. Life never to be the same again. The worst could never be the worst again. She would never look at the world in the same way again. Everything now looked different, very different indeed!!! The people in her life, the places in her life. It was all the same... but everything now looked different, all of life looked different!

So if there's a lesson to be learned from this Easter event, it's just that. The world can never look the same if you're seeing it through Easter eyes, seeing it through the experience of Christ alive!

Has life lost some of its luster these past weeks? Yes! Do we have anxieties about the future that we haven't had before in this way? For most of us, yes.

Mary Magdalene's look at life had gone through those changes as well – life as she had known it, with Jesus at her side, was no longer – but with Easter eyes she now saw that the gift of life was still a gift, that the Jesus who had been with her was still with her, that life was not lost.

Neither is ours. The music and flowers and Easter breakfasts may be gone for a while, but Easter isn't! The God we meet in Jesus isn't gone!

Life – in the presence of the God who is with us - is still a gift.

Amen.

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This message is available on video from the synod website:

<https://scsw-elca.org/community/>

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