

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

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. So 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.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and 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. They 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.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus 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."' ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**“Jesus Christ”  
Rev. Charles Schuster  
March 23, 2008**

There are some children in the congregation today, as they often are, and I want to say to the parents of the children that I'm giving them a job. Their job is to keep the adults awake, and to help me with this sermon. And to do that, they're going to have to make a little noise. And my job is to speak just a little louder than they're speaking. So as long as we all do our jobs, this will be a beautiful thing.

I think it's all due to the fact that the time change, perhaps, when we lost an hour. Where did it go? But Holy Week and Easter this year just doesn't seem right. We gathered for the sunrise service this morning and there was no sun. I said to them, "Why don't we go outside and do the service?" Real Christians, real Methodists go outside and do the service. They looked at me and said, "Go for it." The fact that Holy Week happens concurrent to Spring Break means that lots of our families are on vacation and they're not back, so that they won't hear I think the most important word that we have from the

church, is what we speak at Easter. And you add to that, it's this March madness thing. It's not easy to write a sermon when you really know you ought to be watching a game. Not only that, there are these historic rivalries. Friday night I was bringing some folks up to the church in my car. One of the women in the car was a Presbyterian, imagine that, and she wanted to know where I'd gone to seminary, and I said I'd attended Duke. She said that she was a graduate of the University of North Carolina. So on the corner of Prospect and Center Avenue, I told her to get out of the car. I think it's due to the time change. It just seems really weird this year. I mean, it just seems really strange. I feel a little like the people in the airplane, back a number of years ago, this was before radar, before jets, before wide bodies and jumbos. The plane was a DC3, it was flying over the Rocky Mountains, and it was in the fog. The pilot came on with an announcement and said, "This is your captain speaking. I have some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news. We're lost. Now the good news. We're two hours ahead of schedule."

That's sort of how it's been, it's a difficult Lent, a difficult Holy Week. Easter came so early. We just got through Advent. We celebrated the birth of Jesus, and now we're thinking about his death, and now it's Easter. I mean, he was born, he suffered, he died, he's alive. Easter is just different and difficult, I think, this year. It's never been as early, it can never be earlier than it is, and it just seems wrong. But it's difficult, I think, for two reasons, and I think it always is, for two reasons. First of all, Easter is difficult because it calls us by name. We've been thinking together in the sermons during Lent, we've been thinking about the names that Jesus was called. We know he was the son of Mary, we know he was the son of Joseph, we know he was the son of David, we know he was the son of Abraham. Today, Easter calls us by name, and we don't like to be called by name.

I teach a number of classes here at the church. In fact, we've been involved in a six-week class on the seven last words at the cross. We'll finish it next Wednesday. In every class there are two types of adults here at this church. There are people who like to talk, because they have a lot to say, and I ignore them. And then there are people who come to classes and they're shy and they don't like to talk, and I try to call on them by asking them questions. That's to annoy them, and to let them know that if they have something to say, they can have the space to say it. But they don't like it. They don't like it. And some of them will tell me, "Don't ever call on me." And I can understand that. Sometimes we become shy because we know there have been times when we have been called upon or we have said something in public and it just didn't come off in a way that we sounded very smart. And so we're reluctant to speak up. Like NBA basketball player Jason Kidd, when he was drafted by the Dallas Mavericks right out of college, and he said, "We're gonna turn this franchise around 360 degrees." And Britney Spears. Somebody asked her what was the best thing about being a celebrity, and she said, "You get to go to lots of places overseas, like Canada." And former Vice President Dan Quayle. You could write a book. He said to a crowd at O'Hare Airport, "It's wonderful to be here in the great state of Chicago." So we say things that don't make us sound very smart, and so Easter is tough, because at Easter we're called upon.

The risen Christ said to Mary, "Mary," he said to her, he called her by name, and she said to him, "Rabbouni," which means teacher. Easter calls us by name. Don Messer wrote a

book, *A Conspiracy of Goodness*, and in this book he tells about that terrible time in World War II when the Germans had rolled into Norway. Hitler ordered Christians on Easter Sunday to profess their sense of supremacy and allegiance to him, and the Bishop of Norway refused to do it, as did other Christians. Easter Sunday, services were called off. The Fuhrer's command was rejected. But Easter Sunday afternoon, people came together in this one particular town. They came into the town square to protest the Nazis, and as they walked toward the church, they sang. They drew from their historic resources of the past, and ironically, they sang a song written by Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God, a Bulwark Never Failing." And as they reached the steps of the church, because that's where they were headed, an SS guard waved his machine gun and ordered them to stop, and pointed the gun at a pregnant woman in the front of the crowd and said, "The next sound I hear from you people, she will be the first to die." Silence fell over the crowd. People looked down at the earth. Suddenly, a lone voice began to sing. "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." And then the whole crowd joined in and everybody sang together. And the Nazi stepped back. And can you guess who dared to sing? Who dared to put that woman's life in danger? It was the pregnant woman herself. Easter called her by name. In one way or another, Easter calls us by name.

He called Simon Petros, Peter, the rock. He called James son of thunder. He called Mary Magdalene, and this is not fantasy, it's as real as it gets. It's not a religious talk on a Sunday when you have a captive audience, it's straight talk at a time that gets our attention. It's not some abstract unclarity, a distant word with a faint voice. I'm reminded of the photographer who was assigned to take pictures of the forest fire. They told him that there would be a small plane waiting for him at the airport and he could fly over the fire. The photographer arrived at the airstrip. Just like they said, it was around sundown, there was a small plane there. Its engine was running. He jumped into the plane with his equipment. He shouted, "Let's go," and the pilot, a tense-looking man, turned the plane into the wind, and very soon they were up in the air, although they were flying erratically. "Fly over the north side of the fire, and make several low passes," the photographer said. The pilot said, "Why would I do that?" The photographer said, "Because I'm going to take some pictures. I'm a photographer, that's what photographers do, so do it." And the pilot replied, "You're not the flight instructor, are you."

Easter does that to us. It makes us fly where we've never been, it calls us to do what we've never done. It calls out. He called out to Mary, "Mary," he said. "Rabbouni," she answered. We are called by name and told that there is something in our name we've got to claim. Some reason for us to be we haven't been. Something in our makeup that we can realize, and you can't run and you can't hide, and you may not understand what you've been asked to do, only that you've been asked to do it. It was Soren Kierkegaard who said, "Every moment that a self exists, it is in the process of becoming." Easter calls us forward, personally, directly and emphatically. "Fly over the north side of the fire and make several low passes." We are called by name and reminded your days are important. You can bring change. We are called by name and encouraged, when we stand up, to stand tall and do not be afraid, because there is absolutely nothing in life that can hurt you. Easter calls us by name.

The second thing that's hard about Easter, and I think every year, but especially this year. We are told, "Don't hold onto me. You must finish the story. Don't hold onto me, I have not ascended to God, but go and finish the story." Mary, and all of us like Mary, on earth, don't hold onto Jesus. Go and finish the story. Friday night here at the church our choir and orchestra performed the Mozart's Requiem, and I want to say, on behalf of the church, this adult choir, they worked so hard on that Requiem, it was a beautiful thing, as I said before, and here they are providing music for us for three of the services here this morning. I just want to thank you on behalf of the congregation (applause). Pam turned to me and said, "That choir, they're too good for us." The place was packed, it's like it was today, and that choir, that orchestra, did something in a way that had more to do with Easter, I think, than requiem and death. We learned how Mozart had been commissioned to write the Requiem by a count who was going to defraud him and claim authorship for himself. Dr. Kim told us, we learned how Mozart died in writing it, and he only got half paid for it, and we learned how Mozart's widow asked one of his students to finish it, but it never quite was finished, and somehow it was finished later by someone else. And Friday night, absolutely faithful to the composer, our choir and orchestra, director of music and organist, our congregation participating, we created the next installment. They finished the music, the music for now, in our day, for music that is timeless.

Every now and then ministers, pastors in churches, get ourselves in trouble. We are asked our opinion, and normally we try to encourage what's being asked, and so we agree and we go along. And sometimes the result is we make huge mistakes. I've made lots of mistakes as a pastor in churches. It all began back in North Carolina one summer when I organized a greased pig contest. I don't know what I was thinking. We used the wrong kind of grease, and the pig was too big, and it ended up chasing the children. Until it ran into the woods, and it hasn't been seen since. I could write a book of mistakes. Every year we flower this cross. The cross behind it, by the way, the cross you saw when you came in is the cross that I pounded a spike into a year ago, when the choir was singing a cantata. The spike is still there, and so's my shoulder. Most of the time, the flowers we put on the cross come from people's gardens. You bring flowers from your garden, we put them on the cross. This year, because Easter's so early – who made that decision? – our gardens have no flowers. The Senior Council had this project of these wonderful lilies, you know, they promoted the lilies and we have more lilies this year than I think we've ever had. 86 lilies. You buy a lily for more than they cost, and the proceeds go to the Senior Council and the things they're doing, we get to use them in worship, you can take yours after the service this morning, or come back Tuesday if you like. You get to honor a loved one or a friend, that's what the insert's about in the bulletin. It's a wonderful thing, and you get to keep the plant. That's just the way it is, it's a wonderful thing. But this year, since there were no flowers in our gardens, a staff member came to me and said, "I've got an idea. Why don't we just, since we have so many of these lilies, why don't we just clip one of the flowers off of each of the plants, and use those flowers to flower the cross?" I thought that was a great idea, and we were going to do it. A member of the Senior Council heard that I had approved this idea, and was therefore responsible for it, and she got upset with me. I think she's going to try to get me fired. I could be wrong about that. The Senior Council committee is out to get me because they thought I would cut one of the flowers from each of the pots and put it on the cross. Some

staff member suggested it, I thought it was a good idea. When we had the conversation, I said, "I'm sure that the people who donated those lilies, I'm real sure that they wouldn't mind, in fact they'd be honored, to honor a friend and loved one, that their lily, one of their flowers would be on the – they would – no problem with that." I said, "What better way to honor a friend or loved one, than to put a flowered cross in front of the old rugged cross, to turn this instrument of death into something of magnificent beauty." I said, "Don't you know that's what Jesus meant when he said, 'Don't hold onto me.'"" Don't worry, your lilies didn't get a haircut. The staff person who suggested the idea was kidding me, and as for the committee member who probably has some thoughts about getting me fired, she and I will work this out. She lives with me. She's my wife. We're okay, Kathy.

But it's up to us to finish the story. It's important that we not hold onto Jesus as we think he is, but allow the risen Christ to be present in ways maybe we hadn't even imagined. I tell you, it's a good thing that Mary finished the story, to tell about what happened, and didn't try to hold onto Jesus. Because of Mary and the way she told the story, the disciples then found the courage to become apostles. And the one that was called the Rock, Simon, became the rock that Peter knew he could become. And the church was the result. Because of Mary and her willingness to tell the story, and not hold onto Jesus, then they began to compile sayings of Jesus which eventually they put together and they became part of the Gospels of Jesus, and what we have is the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer. We have the Golden Rule, and we have all those beautiful parables because of Mary. Because of Mary and her willingness to tell the story and to finish the story and not hold onto Jesus. Paul was confronted with the risen Christ and he wrote a number of letters which include that one about love, that says that love is patient and kind. It goes on to say faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love, and if you don't have love you're a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. Because of Mary, and her willingness to finish the story and not hold onto Jesus, there's a little man on the Isle of Patmos who began to speak of God as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Because of Mary, an anonymous writer in a letter that we call Hebrews, defined faith as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. What a beautiful definition.

It isn't finished. If we don't hold onto him, if we relax our grip on who we think he was, we can finish the story. And when you go back to work tomorrow, you can know that while there's a lot wrong with the world, and there is, the God who created it hasn't given up on it, and neither must we. And when you go back to school on Monday, the challenges, I don't think they'll be any less daunting than they were, but you've been equipped with the power of love that knows that every test is an opportunity. And when you step away from the dinner table today, and you think about your loved ones who aren't with you in a physical way, you begin to realize that they are with you in a way that really matters. And all of a sudden you realize that Easter is a reunion, not a separation. You and I, we do not hold onto him. We go and we finish the story, and we tell it in our day. We think big thoughts. We savor small pleasures and Easter we retell. We know not what the future holds, but we know who holds it. Easter came early this year. Like other

years it presents us with two tasks. It calls us by name; it's personal. It commands us to finish the story, to live the truth, and to speak the hope that Christ the Lord is risen today.