

Indigestible

John 20: 1-18

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John 20 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 towards 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.

¹¹ But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.' 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.

Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb. After the whispered betrayal and the bloodthirsty roars; after the crack of whips and the thud of nails sinking into green lumber; after the clack of dice and the taunts of guards; after the last gasping breath, all was finally quiet. And Mary Magdalene was weeping.

I imagine her cussing softly. "When will the indignities stop? Haven't they done enough? Did they really need to deprive us of his battered body? Do they really need to prevent us from rubbing a few spices into his bruised brow? All that is left to me is weeping."

The men are no help. As soon as Mary informs them that the body is gone, they race around in a panic. Peter looks like a crazed weasel. You can hear their nervous chatter on the wind. "Maybe they will come for us next." "We better keep our heads

down.” “Stay away from public places.” “Disperse. Go... now!”

The Gospel of John reports that the disciples fled to their homes. They were all gone, except for Mary Magdalene. She just stood there, looking at the empty tomb, and crying. After a while, to confirm her fears, Mary bends to peer into the open grave, and there she sees two figures, all in white, sitting on the stone. They look up at her and ask, “Woman, why are you weeping?” It has to be one of the stupidest questions ever asked.

Why is she weeping? Good gracious. Think of all the answers Mary might give.

I am weeping...

- because he’s gone.
- because he was gentle and talked about love, and the world takes a crowbar to people like that.
- because he treated me like a human being, like someone with a brain and a soul and not as a piece of meat.
- because his teachings pointed toward God in a way that made sense. They weren’t superstitious. They weren’t mean-spirited. They made sense.
- because there will *never* be anyone else like him.
- because now... now, I do not even have his body to fuss over.

“Why am I weeping? Are you kidding? I’m standing in a cemetery. What do you think?”

I have done a lot of funerals in my time as a pastor. I am still astonished at the change that comes over a limo full of friends and family—people chatting merrily (if nervously) as they adjust their neckties and fix their lipstick, when the car drives through the front gate of the cemetery. Suddenly, all goes quiet. Conversations stop cold. The proximity of the dead sucks the words right out of people.

In other words, we “get” why Mary was crying. We’ve been there. We’ve stood by open graves. We know the power of death. It consumes our mothers and fathers, our friends and our enemies. Death dominates our headlines. “One hundred four people killed in protests against the government in Syria yesterday.” It gorges itself on our wars. It licks its lips over flag-draped coffins. It grins at every attempt to escape its grasp—chuckling at our plastic surgeries and our hair dyes and even our health food kicks. It haunts our every decision. Death is the ultimate opportunist. Just this week, the papers reported that every time the economy goes into recession, suicide numbers in this country rise. That doesn’t surprise us, does it? When the pressures seize us, we wonder how bad it would be to surrender. After all, one way or the other, death always wins.

Acknowledging its all-consuming power, the ancient Hebrew people called the realm of the dead *Sheol*. *Sheol* was a realm of darkness—a vast place that could hold the spirit of everything that had ever lived. Curiously, *Sheol* wasn’t always pictured as a place. In the Old Testament, the prophets would frequently talk about *Sheol* as if it were a beast—a ravenous monster whose appetite for devouring the living is never satisfied. As Isaiah puts it, *Sheol* “enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit.” Without limit. Yes, that’s what we know about death. It eats. It consumes *without limit*. It swallows our loved ones. One day it will wolf us down too. It is never satisfied. It always wins.

Why is Mary Magdalene crying? Give her a break. Distraught, she turns away

from the two dudes in white choir robes and runs smack into the gardener, or what looks like a gardener if your eyes are filled with salt water and all you can see are colored blotches. Then, like a broken record, like a clueless guy at a cocktail party, the gardener asks the same stupid question: “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Exhausted, done with pleasantries, Mary gets all New York on the guy. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” At this point, Mary doesn’t want the forces of death to thwart her last chance to care for her friend. All she wants is to wash his limbs, comb out his hair, and rub some fragrant oil into his skin. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him.” She hopes that the gardener will lead her to Jesus’ body. It is the only hope that Mary has left.

It is an incredibly touching thing—this hope of Mary’s. It’ll make you weep, it is so precious. And yet, it isn’t enough. That, my friends, is the message of Easter. That is the startling news trumpeted to us from a garden outside Jerusalem this morning. Mary’s hope wasn’t big enough. Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to pick on Mary. The disciples didn’t have a big enough hope either. Heck, they didn’t appear to have any hope at all. They fled to their apartments. They were hiding. After the crucifixion, they looked into each other’s frightened eyes and *knew* that they were facing a harsh reality. They had worked the algebra, and they all came to the same conclusion. As my friend Michael Jinkins puts it, “Dead is dead. Gone is gone. Impossible is impossible.”

Maybe none of us have a *big enough hope* for Easter. Can your expectations jump that high? Our spiritual hamstrings are so tight. Who has time to stretch them? All our lives we have been taught to exercise other muscles. We have been taught to assess danger, to hedge our bets, and, when things really get crazy, to duck our heads and run away. That is why, this morning of all mornings, we should give thanks that Easter pursues us. Easter comes after us and calls us by name. In today’s text, all it takes from Jesus is one word to upend Mary Magdalene’s expectations, one word to cast aside her scaled-down hopes and replace them with joy. One word, “Mary!”

In a voice that was supposed to be gone, in a tone that she never thought she would hear again, Jesus says, “Mary!” And at that moment, all the algebra in Ms. Magdalene’s head, all the old lessons about how life sucks, how death always wins, and how the best we can hope to do is rub a little ointment on our broken friends—all the hard knock wisdom she has ever acquired goes flying out the window. Jesus says, “Mary!” and a new possibility dawns. What if death doesn’t win?

One of the greatest preachers in the ancient church was a guy named John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was the Archbishop of Constantinople around the year 400. As a young monk, he was known as John of Antioch. Over time, however, the people of that region were so taken by his speechifying that they gave him the title *Chrysostom*—which literally translated means “Golden Mouth.” In one of his most famous sermons, an Easter sermon, Chrysostom asked his congregation, “How did death lose its power over people of faith?” Then, he answers his own rhetorical question by pointing to Christ. “That Body, which death could not digest, it received: and therefore had to cast forth that which it had ingested. Yes, death suffered in pain, while he held Christ, and was distressed until he vomited Him up.”

I bet the people in Constantinople, dressed in their Easter best, out to hear a

preacher whom they had kindly nicknamed “Golden Mouth,” gasped and covered their children’s ears. “What a rude image. What an irresponsible picture to put into our heads this happy morning. Really, Preacher, couldn’t you compare the resurrection to something pretty? How about a blooming lily? Can’t you come up with a better Easter theme than the indigestible Christ? Who really wants to imagine death regurgitating Jesus?”

Who? I’ll tell you who. Mary Magdalene and everybody who has ever conceived of death as a monster whose appetite will never be sated. In fact, immune to any protests, Chrysostom keeps right on preaching. “Wait a minute,” he says. “I’m wrong. This whole vomiting thing doesn’t work. Christ didn’t pop back out of death’s mouth. No. Jesus cut his way out of death’s belly. On his way out, our Lord destroyed the beast.” Now, there’s an Easter image for you. Death couldn’t hold him. Jesus shredded the monster from the inside out. It is wild stuff, and it certainly gets Mary Magdalene going. Immediately, she runs off to find the disciples in their hidey-holes. She tugs them into the light and hits them with life-changing news. “Guess what?” she says, “I have seen the Lord.” “Guess what? Death doesn’t win.” Like those first disciples, Mary’s proclamation prods us into action, calling us all to run and shout words of life in every place where death would seek to renew its feast.

This past week, I received an email from Matthew Davis. Matthew is the pastor of Lamington Presbyterian Church about an hour due west of here in New Jersey. Last Friday, Matthew got a call from the local nursing home. He was informed that a resident was dying and that her twin sister wanted a pastor to come say a prayer. So Matthew went. On arrival, he was confronted with the typical smells and sounds of a nursing home—signs that the monster of death is near. Finding the twins’ room, he met two women in their nineties. The sister who had placed the phone call introduced herself as Dr. Francis Craig and her dying sister as Dr. Eleanor Craig. Both of the women had obtained their doctorates in music, studying under Virgil Fox, the premier organist of his day. In their own careers, in a time when many believed that women could not be great organists, these two distinguished musicians played recitals at Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame, and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

“It was amazing,” Matthew wrote, “to see Francis come to life as she spoke of days gone past. I was taken by her story but deeply saddened to see that such accomplished musicians had no CD player or tape player let alone an iPod to comfort them. So, I went down to the nearby Borders and picked up a collection of Bach organ pieces (played by their teacher, Virgil Fox) and returned to the home. I cranked up the volume on a CD player so that everyone in the nursing home could hear—with or without hearing devices. As the music swelled, Francis’ hands, which are quite clinched, straightened as she played along with her former teacher. What a day! We played sister Eleanor into that great mystery.”

What gives us the pluck to play Bach at full tilt in nursing homes? What gives us the courage to stretch our hopes to such an impossible height? The one who entered the grave like us, and then opened a way for us. The indigestible Christ. Jesus the Victor.

He is risen.

He is risen, indeed.