

Festival Sermon 2016

John 20:1-18

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The Festival of Homiletics is a conference for preachers that takes place every year in May. There are multiple worship services that happen throughout the week, and they are all festive, but this year, “festival worship” really kicked into high gear. The liturgy team for opening worship decided that they wanted to recreate Easter, complete with organ, brass, tympani, and a one hundred voice choir. They asked me to prepare a sermon on the John 20 Easter text, which I did—and it was quite an experience celebrating Easter (two months later) with a few thousand preachers and thinking about resurrection from the perspective of the preaching life.

So you may have noticed: the liturgy team is recreating Easter, tonight. Not because we didn't get the memo that Pentecost was yesterday — we did. But sometimes, preachers just need to be in a festival worship service that they didn't have to plan themselves. Amen? The Lord is risen, and *you* didn't have to proof the bulletin. Christ is risen, and it's the preacher's turn to receive the good news. That's what this week is about. Bread for the journey, rest for the weary, and resurrection for the preachers. Hallelujah.

Resurrection for the preachers

So what might that look like? Renewed energy? That'd be awesome. A fresh dose of inspiration? Sure. Enough faith, hope, and love to get us through another season? Sign me up. The folks back home may think we're here for continuing education, but really it's resuscitation therapy. It takes a lot of life to be a preacher, and sometimes we're hard pressed to find sinews on these bones, let alone breath to rattle them and raise them up. So maybe it's good for us to linger on a resurrection passage, especially one that's so familiar and recent. What does this text have to say to a roomful of tired preachers about homiletical resurrection? How are we going to rise up, how is the *church* going to rise up and proclaim a prophetic Word for changing times?

Well, Mary is the preacher in this text, so let's start with her. Mary's not the first person you think of when you think of a great preacher. She didn't have a congregation or a big pulpit or a bunch of degrees after her name to indicate her splendid homiletical education. Mary wasn't a religious leader at all, or even in training to be one. Sometimes we include her when we talk about Jesus' disciples, but when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John talk about The Twelve, they don't mean Mary. They mean the men who were personally called to join the movement: Peter, James, John, and the rest. Those men knew that preaching was in their future, and they got a front row seat in class for three years, and Jesus even had them organized into preaching small groups so they could practice in pairs on missionary field trips. They were a seminary class of twelve, with the best supervised ministry placement ever. But Mary? She wasn't in that program, not formally, anyway. She was just someone who loved Jesus and wanted to follow him.

She was also someone with a past. Not necessarily a racy one; all that prostitute gossip is mostly a Middle Ages invention; scripture doesn't really support it. No, Mary's past was that she was the woman who used to have seven demons. Jesus healed a lot of people, and some of the women who traveled with him and the Twelve and supported them financially had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities. But Mary — there were *seven* demons that had to come out of her. That's a lot. That's enough disease and mental illness and chronic pain for a whole neighborhood or at least one person and her extended family. We can only guess what the demon-tormented Mary used to be like, talking to herself on the bus or confined to bed for months or slumped in the corner with a needle in her arm: demons take many forms. They turn you into a basement person, as Carlyle Marney used to put it, someone who comes to the church back door for outreach services. Jesus cast out Mary's demons, and she loved him for it, but he couldn't erase the collective memory of who she used to be. It trailed along behind her like a shadow. It was how people identified her: *This is Mary, the woman who used to have seven demons until Jesus cast them out, apparently with no side effects, but you never know, so be aware; be careful...* Mary had a past that was always right there like a sign around her neck. And I wonder whether people came to gawk at her like some carnival sideshow — “exhibit A for epic exorcism” — or whether they ever invited her to speak for herself, to tell her own story, as she lived it. I wonder whether Mary ever got to say, “This is what the kingdom of God looks like to me.” The disciples got to practice that. I don't know if Mary did.

So here she is on Easter morning: Mary weeping at the tomb because that's what you do when someone you love has died. You just grieve. Sit down next to the body and cry. Hold it one more time, do what you can to prepare it for burial, say goodbye, cry all over again. It doesn't sound like anything we were taught to do in sermon preparation process, but maybe after reading this text, we should think about it: start by just crying. Go to the tomb of what the empire has murdered and lament. Jesus didn't die of natural causes. His death was plotted. It was staged. It was meant as a warning: *Don't you ever rise up to challenge the power of Rome. We will break you. We will desecrate your body. Your mother will have to watch. And no one with any sense will stand by you.* Crucifixion is an abomination that finds equivalents in every age, and it is designed to intimidate the witness. But grief is a form of resistance. Maybe something this text is showing us is that a preacher doesn't hide from that grief. A preacher seizes it, walks right into it. Let the other disciples be the sensible ones. They can hunker down in a locked room to strategize about survival and interim leadership. Mary didn't follow that logic. She got up early in the morning while it was still dark and went to the tomb, because that's what you do when someone you love, something you believe in, has died. You just grieve.

There's a plot twist, of course. Nobody expects resurrection. The Spanish Inquisition maybe, but not the resurrection. Mary saw the stone had been rolled away from the tomb and the body moved, and she ran and told the disciples who came to see for themselves (making sure to report who ran the fastest and got there first, because competitive discipleship, *that's* important), and soon it was clear: the tomb was empty. The disciples took one look and left — this was not a crime scene they wanted to be involved in — but Mary stayed and wept some more. And now, there was even more to cry about. Someone had taken away her Lord, and she didn't know where they had laid him. Someone had stolen his body. And really, what other explanation could

there be? When the Jesus you know doesn't stay in the place where you've put him, isn't somebody to blame?

They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him. That's something we hear a lot in the seminary after the first semester when the bible faculty has had its way with the students: *They've deconstructed my Jesus, and I don't know where they've left him.* But it's a pretty constant refrain in other places, too. Church folk say it when we try to change up the worship service with new music or liturgy: *They've replaced my Jesus, and I don't know where they've put him.* Denominations say it when we have to grapple with new Supreme Court decisions and church doctrine: *They've rewritten my Jesus, and I don't know where they've laid him.* Even preachers say it when we go to the text expecting one thing and find that it's pulled the rug out from under us and totally disrupted what we were planning to say in the sermon: *They've rebooted my Jesus, and I don't know where they've relocated him, and I don't have time on a Saturday night to look.* When Jesus doesn't stay in the place where you've put him, it's so easy to point fingers and cast blame. It might even be our first instinct as human beings, because nobody expects resurrection from an empty tomb. And before you know it, our graveyard grief has shifted focus. We aren't crying for a crucified Jesus. We're weeping over a stolen body, and everyone we meet is a potential thief.

That's where Mary is. Jesus appears right in front of her, and she can't even recognize him in the state she's in. She thinks he's the gardener and that *he did it!*—major textual irony on John's part. "Sir," she begs him, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." She might as well have said, *Look, I won't press charges. Just show me the body, and we'll pretend it never happened. Put it back, and I promise I won't ever tell.* This would have been one way for a preacher to end the story: if the empty tomb unsettles you, well, let me smooth it over for you. Let's rewind and put Jesus back where he was before all this change and craziness happened.

But you know, the story isn't nearly over, and thank God for that. Thank God Mary is still hanging in there, through the tears and confusion and virtual reality scene changes, which is instructive for a preacher: when it gets weird in the graveyard, just go with it.

So two things happen. The first is that Jesus calls Mary by name, because when you're crying about who took your Jesus away, I guess there's only one thing that will stop you. *Mary. MARY.* You have to hear him say your name. I don't know why except that maybe we can't see resurrection any other way. And you *have* to see it; you have to *see* it because it's not like you can *explain* it; if you could *explain* it, Jesus would have said, "I believe you're operating with a false hermeneutic, Mary. Sit down and let me interpret these events for you." You can't explain resurrection. It *addresses you*; it calls you out. *Mary!* That's all he had to say, and she knew. There isn't any guilty gardener; there isn't any stolen body. There's a *risen* body! And what are the first words out of her mouth? A confession: *Rabbouni!*—which doesn't mean "teacher" at all, but, *my Lord. My Lord!*

We can guess what she tried to do next. She tried to embrace him: that's the second thing that happens, because he literally says, "Stop holding onto me; stop clinging to me." Call it the first post-resurrection teaching: *Stop holding onto Jesus.* You can see the risen Christ, but you can't cling to him. You can confess your faith in Jesus,

but you can't own him. Jesus is loose in the world, and no tomb of expectations is going to hold him down.

It's an amazing moment, this embrace, because it shows us how quickly it can happen, how we are almost programmed as human beings to harden our experience into universals. One moment of absolute clarity sparks an embrace, and we make our confession of faith—and then we can't help it; we start to cling to it and control it and defend it and measure others against it until before you know it, we think we can judge what resurrection looks like. "My Lord!" turns into "*My Lord; mine!*" Like clockwork: remarkable. And thank God for Mary who shows us what the sequence looks like and does it with such grace and purity. Her embrace is an act of love, and Jesus knows it, but he also knows the flip side of that act, what it could become. It is a teachable moment. *Don't hold onto me. Stop clinging to me. But listen, Mary: I have some other verbs to give you. Go and tell.*

And she does. She lets go of him, the Jesus she knew and loved, and she goes out not to write the church's first creed, but to preach the church's first sermon: *I have seen the Lord*. It is not a doctrine; it is not an explanation. It is a *testimony* to what she saw and what she believes. And there is no guarantee that out there in the world people will accept it, no guarantee at all that they will hear her as a credible witness. Actually, given who she is and who she used to be, they probably won't. But she's the one who showed up to see, so she's the one who was sent. Now there is only the hope that her life as a disciple will confirm what she says, which is that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. *Go and tell.*

So there you have it. Resurrection for the preachers according to John 20. An anatomy of encounter and a case study in the stages of sermon preparation. But let's be honest: there's a disconcerting quality to it, because what this text says about preaching isn't what the church usually says. Who does Jesus commission for the first Easter sermon? A basement person. A woman with no training and few credentials and a rather disturbing past. Seven demons. Can we really be sure they haven't scarred her irreparably? Can we trust her with a leadership role? What if she says something inappropriate or doctrinally unsound? This is not the person you and I would pick to best represent the church and deliver the Easter message. But look here: Jesus does. This is who he sends to preach to the likes of you and me. Mary, who didn't know any better than to watch a crucifixion or cry in a graveyard or throw her arms around Jesus every chance she got. Mary, who never got an official call or passed an ordination exam or knew a focus from a function. Apparently she's met the risen Christ in ways we haven't, because we were thinking about our own survival and stayed home. She went looking for Jesus. And she found him and then found us to tell us about it.

A week ago today, I was in Jamaica with a group of students from Columbia Seminary where I teach. It wasn't a vacation. It was a class, and the purpose was to see what the church in another context is doing to live out its mission in the world. So we didn't go to Negril or Montego Bay where the tourists go. We stayed in Kingston where a lot of tourists are afraid to go. Our hosts for two weeks were the wonderful faculty and students of the United Theological College of the West Indies. We stayed on their beautiful campus, and one of the professors set up a program of lectures and site visits for us. We heard from leading scholars on Jamaican theology, economics, history, and culture. We visited schools and hospitals and prisons and churches. We saw community gardens and youth centers and training programs in some of the

worst slums in Kingston. And the morning of our last day, we went to visit a home for severely handicapped women run by the Missionaries of the Poor.

We were all nervous as we got off the bus. We knew that what we were about to see wouldn't be easy. The Missionaries of the Poor is an international brotherhood dedicated to serving, as they put it, the least, the lost, and the last. They are a refuge and a community for the abandoned and the destitute. Their budget is a shoestring. We were prepared for the humble facilities and crowded conditions and the physical infirmities of the women we were about to meet. What we didn't anticipate was the joy. As we entered the courtyard, a dozen women ran and hobbled and in some cases crawled to embrace us. They took our hands and led us to the dining area, smiling and talking in words we mostly understood. And all the awkwardness we had felt about what we were supposed to be doing with them, how we were supposed to serve, simply vanished, because the women took the lead; they showed us how to be with them. They walked with us, sat with us, and in one case danced to the music with us. Then they prayed for us. "What is your name?" one woman asked a student. "Emily," the student said (She said I could tell you about this). The woman closed her eyes, took Emily's face in her hands, and said, "Dear God, I pray for Emily, that you will keep her safe, and thank you for bringing her here today. Amen." She opened her eyes and smiled. "I will pray for you every day, Emily," she told her. The students and I just looked at each another. Who was serving whom here? Who was teaching whom about what it means to proclaim the Word? "They teach me about joy," one of the brothers told us. "It may seem like we are missionaries to them, but really, it is the other way around. We are their missionaries to the world."

Maybe the church is at its best and preaching at its truest when Mary is the one who tells us what she has seen. Maybe she's the one we should be listening to now. After all, she was Jesus' first choice for an Easter sermon. He always did like reversal.