

EASTERS

John 20:1-18

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on April 12, 2020, Easter Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This was the fifth Sunday of a closing for the Coronavirus pandemic and was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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 toward 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 around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus 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." 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.

Prayer:

Winston Churchill once referred to "distant episodes" that are as "close and real as the mighty events [at] hand." Lord, on this Easter day, may we see the "distant episodes" of empty tomb and appearances of your Son as close and real as the mighty events that are upon us today. May Jesus' calling of Mary's name outside the tomb lead us to see light and life, in ourselves and in your world. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.

This marks the fortieth Easter I have led as a Pastor; the thirty-seventh on which I have preached. And it has without a doubt been the most unusual Easter I have faced.

From Easters I knew as a child growing up in the South in the 1950s and 1960s, the day was almost always as beautiful as this day is in Alexandria:

- Bright green grass
- Flowers in full bloom
- The warmth of spring ushering out the cold of winter with hardly a hint of the heat of summer to come.

In the Easters of my childhood:

- Women wore hats
- Men and even boys dressed in suits
- Girls sported new Easter dresses, often sewn with care and joy by mothers like those sewing masks this week, others ordered from the Sears and Roebuck Catalogue.

Though I obviously grew up to become a preacher, I cannot say that I remember a single Easter sermon from my childhood, but I remember the *mood*, the *atmosphere*, the *sparkle* of Easter after Easter after Easter. Once I was ordained, Easter soon became my favorite Sunday of the year. It never occurred to me that in 2020 I would lead an Easter service in an empty sanctuary – shuttered like the rest of our robust nation – by the threat and reality of pandemic.

Yet even as I lead today in the presence of technology that connects us in ways richer than I would have imagined a month ago, I am aware that the virtual connection we experience online is but the tip of a deeper connection we have with one another and with those with whom we have sat in this Sanctuary over the years: family members, lifelong friends, newly-found objects of our instinct for romantic love, and those who would no longer join us in these earthly pews for their pews are now placed in heavenly sanctuaries. We join with others – on earth and in heaven – saying if not singing: “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today!”

I.

I want to share with you today two vivid memories I have of Easters past.

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In 1982, the church as I was serving as an Associate Pastor for Youth Ministries was struck by a severe flood late in the spring. Six people were killed. Three years earlier, also in the spring, the city had been devastated by the most severe tornado in Texas’ history, which had killed 43 people and destroyed twenty percent of the homes and business in the community. Many of those same persons were affected by the flood as well, in a double-jeopardy rarely found in the vicissitudes of nature.

The three pastors of the church – all of whose homes were *not* damaged – met, went through our printed church picture directories, and circled the names and addresses of the families in the congregation we thought affected. We set out to visit them one by one, many via canoe.

The senior pastor and I paddled up to one home from which the waters had receded enabling us to get out of the canoe and walk up to the front yard. There were toys, papers, kitchen utensils, clothes, sections of drywall, mattresses and box springs spread out on the soaked green grass. A family in the church with several young children lived in the house, and by the time we arrived we understood everyone to be safe.

But the mother was standing in the front yard holding in her hand a white, plastic shoe that belonged to a doll. Her two-year-old daughter was sitting on the porch, playing with a toy, seemingly content, but the mother was frantic.

“Do you know where the doll is?” she said as she held up the white shoe. “Did you see the doll? I can’t find the doll.”

After a few seconds, the older and wiser senior pastor looked at the woman, asked her gently and firmly to look at him, and spoke her name. She looked at him for a minute, then let the shoe from the doll slip from her fingers, and collapsed into his arms in tears. She had been so traumatized by the loss of her home and belongings that the white shoe of a missing doll was all she could think about.

When Mary Magdalene is standing outside the tomb in the passage we just read, like the woman with the doll shoe, she is traumatized by what has happened. By the death of Jesus. By the burial. By finding the stone rolled away. By two disciples going into the tomb, coming out, and not saying anything to her. All she can focus on is her assumption that someone has entered the tomb, stolen and thus desecrated the body. All she can say is

They've taken away the body;
They've taken away the body;
If you have carried him away,
Tell me where you have laid him,
And I will take him away.'

Yet it is when the risen Christ calls her name – Mary – she too collapses into tears, relief, recognition of the risen Christ, and self-recognition. Hearing her name called by the risen Christ, Mary is brought into a reality that is deeper and more powerful than the trauma she has experienced.

Whenever I hear Mary's story read at Easter, I think of the young mother holding the white doll shoe outside the wreckage of her flooded home. In whatever form the risen Christ calls our name, in whatever form or volume we hear our name, his call puts us in touch with a reality deeper and more powerful than any – I will say *any* – trauma distant or close at hand.

II.

The other vivid memory I have of Easter is an equally powerful reversal. It was April 3, 1994.

I remember it well because in my thirty-ninth year, I was finally on the verge of one of my college teams winning a national championship.

- I am a graduate of the University of Arkansas.
- On Saturday night, April 2, the night *before* Easter, my beloved Razorbacks beat the University of Arizona to earn a spot in the national championship game against – yes, the Duke Blue Devils – to be played on the night after Easter, Monday, April 4.
- I was living in Iowa at the time, serving a church in which people were highly interested in that relic of history known as March Madness but not at all interested in the Arkansas Razorbacks, so I had enjoyed referring to the possibility of their playing in the Final Four for a couple of Sundays leading up to Easter.
- When my team clinched the spot in the Championship Game on the Saturday night before Easter, I decided that during the announcements I would simply place on my head the large, red, plastic razorback hat – with full snout extended – to celebrate my own little Easter.

But about an hour before the service was to begin, I received a call that a woman in the congregation had died a few minutes earlier.

- Cathy Hughes was in her mid-forties.
- Hers had been a long, painful, debilitating battle with cancer, that had begun several years before I became her pastor.
- She left behind a husband who was well known in the community, third generation in the church, a college age daughter whom I happened to be teaching that spring in a New Testament class at the local college, and a daughter who was in high school.
- As soon as I heard the news of her death I got in my car, drove out into the country where they lived, and called on them before the service.

I expected it to be a difficult call.

- A young mother.
- Two daughters left behind.
- Dying on Easter morning.

When I rang the doorbell a family member let me in and I couldn't believe what I walked into.

- There were seven or eight people scurrying about.
- A box of donuts was open on the island in the kitchen.
- The sound of multiple blow dryers emanated from bathrooms all over the house – and I realized the fuses were not being blown because her husband was a contractor.
- Make-up was spread out on the dining room table.
- Purses and shopping bags and scarves were at various places.

I felt like I had walked into a scene backstage from *A Chorus Line*.

- I realized that family was preparing to go to *church*.
- They were getting ready to *worship*.
- They were getting ready to celebrate the *resurrection*.

I learned yesterday from the oldest daughter – who is now a Presbyterian pastor – that a few days before that Easter, her mother had told her father that on Easter Sunday, she was going to be singing with the heavenly choir. And a few hours after her death, her family joined her in singing “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today!” in the full sanctuary in which they had always worshipped.

III.

The Gospel of John as a whole is challenging for me to preach, but my favorite narratives of the empty tomb and the appearances of Christ occur in John:

- Mary in the Garden
- Doubting Thomas
- The Rehabilitation of Peter
- The Beloved Disciple.

One thing that jumped out at me this year about Mary in the Garden is the second phrase in the long narrative: “While it was still dark.”

Early on the first day of the week,
While it was still dark,
Mary Magdalene *came* to the tomb...

Perhaps in all those Easters we have anticipated and celebrated – with the size of the congregation, the beauty of the weather, the conviviality of the gathering, the suits and dresses and hats – we have overlooked that the first Easter *emerged in darkness* for people who like Mary were *traumatized*: going to a tomb at night, finding its entrance unsealed and presumably invaded by grave-robbers. The crowd who gathered at the tomb on that first Easter was a lot nearer in size to the seven of us gathered in this sanctuary than the hundreds who would have been here were it not for the pestilence under whose besiegement we are living and laboring.

“*While it was still dark...*” “*Still dark...*”

Easter doesn’t *occur* in the light. But it *brings* the light. “Open cartons of donuts. Blow dryers. ‘I’m going to sing with the heavenly choir at Easter.’” While it is still dark, *Easter brings light*.

IV.

I have shared with you before an occurrence from the annals of American Christianity that is worth our re-hearing.

In 1947, the prominent, prosperous, white First Baptist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana, invited as one of its guest speakers during Holy Week Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, Pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Taylor was on his way to becoming what he was still known as at the time of his death five years ago: the “Dean” of African American preachers in this country.

After finishing his sermons at First Baptist, Dr. Taylor ventured across town, across railroad tracks, across zones of economic and social disparity, across laws segregation and separation, to preach one evening at the smaller, less prosperous, less prominent Evergreen Baptist Church of Shreveport, an all-black congregation.

Midway through the sermon, the power in the Sanctuary – and in the jugged streets of that whole section of town – went out. The sanctuary was totally dark. The congregation was stunned into silence. Not even Dr. Taylor knew what to say.

But after several seconds of silence, a voice from the back of the sanctuary spoke up: “Preach on, Reverend; we can see Jesus in the dark.”¹

“While it is still dark,” we can see Jesus.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA.

¹ Through the “old world” technology of video cassette tapes, I heard Taylor tell this story at the Fosdick Preaching Convocation at Riverside Church in New York in 1978. I believe the trip to Shreveport is referred to in this interview: <https://www.preaching.com/articles/preaching-and-the-power-of-words-an-interview-with-gardner-c-taylor/>.