



John 20:1-17

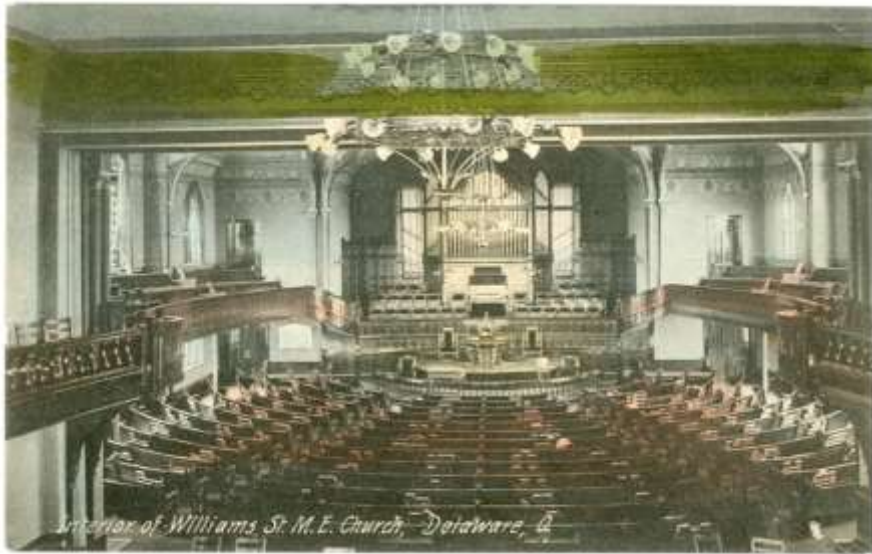
Resurrection and You

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 20:1-17

Easter Sunday - Sanctuary

April 16, 2017

It was my first year of college. March 29, Easter Sunday morning. I made a spur of the moment decision to go to church. I had not been to church since Christmas. Suddenly, I had the urge to attend church on Easter Sunday morning.



I walked the few blocks from my dorm room to the nearest church. It happened to be a Methodist church. I have a vivid recollection of sitting in the pew about halfway back on the

right side. I still recall the sunlight filtering through the stained-glass windows. I remember singing the Easter hymns and listening to the Easter sermon. I remember thinking I want to believe Easter. I really do. Yet the story seems so long ago and far away. What does it have to do with my real, everyday life?

Some of you can identify with this feeling. This sermon is for any of you who are not quite sure what to make of Easter.

Two-thirds of all Americans identify Easter as a religious holiday. The other third of us associate it with things such as Easter bunnies and spring break. Less than half of Americans, 42 percent, can correctly identify Easter with Jesus' resurrection. I repeat: This sermon is for any of you who are not quite sure what to make of Easter.

John's account of the empty tomb centers on a woman named Mary Magdalene (Magdalene refers to Mary's hometown, not her last name). Her purpose in going to the tomb is to give Jesus' body a proper burial. It was an

important ritual back in the day. While the other gospels reference other women, John references only Mary in his gospel account.

Five women have the name Mary in the gospels, so it is easy to confuse them. History has not been kind to Mary Magdalene. One Pope in 591 AD misidentified her as a prostitute. The only thing we know for certain about Mary Magdalene is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her.

Some even go so far as to suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child together which the church has been trying to keep secret for centuries. It's the premise of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Let me remind you, folks, it's a novel, a work of historical fiction. There is not a shred of evidence to suggest they were married. The more salacious the better, where selling novels are concerned.

Okay, back to Mary. "Mary went to the tomb and saw the stone had been removed from the entrance" (20:1). She does not break into singing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." She assumes grave robbers are the guilty party.



Mary Magdalene
went to the
tomb...20.1

Mary runs to tell Peter and John: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him" (20:2). I sense irony in the way John tells this story. Someone *has* taken away her Lord—namely God, but we are getting ahead of ourselves here.

Peter and John run to the tomb. John arrives first and stops at the entrance of the tomb, to peer in. Peter follows closely behind and strides right into the tomb, which is so like Peter.

John takes special note of the grave clothes rolled up and placed neatly where Jesus body had been. Grave robbers would never have bothered.

John “sees and believes” (20:8). Does John believe in Jesus’ resurrection in this moment or does he simply regard Mary’s report of the empty tomb as credible?

Peter and John go home while Mary lingers at the tomb. This is the point in the story where she looks into the tomb. She sees two angels seated there. “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. She tells them, “They have taken away my Lord and I don’t know where they have put him” (20:13).



Mary senses someone behind her. John identifies him as Jesus while Mary does not recognize him. Maybe grief obscures her view or he looks

different somehow. “Woman, why are you weeping?” he asks. “Who are you looking for?” (20:15). She assumes he is a gardener: “Mister, if you have taken him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him.”

Jesus speaks her name. There is something in the way Jesus says her name that discloses his identity. “Mary,” he says. “Rabboni,” she exclaims. It’s a Hebrew word meaning

teacher. “Stop clinging to me,” Jesus tells her (20:17). There is no need for Mary to hang onto Jesus in his resurrected state. When he ascends to God the Father, he will give his Spirit (his presence) to everyone who asks.

Here is my primary take-away from this story. Nobody can conceive of Jesus’ resurrection until it happens: not



Mary Magdalene or the other women who accompany her to the tomb; not Peter, John nor any of his closest disciples. Nobody sees Jesus’ resurrection coming until it happens. Jesus explicitly tells them beforehand of his resurrection before it happens, yet nobody sees it coming.

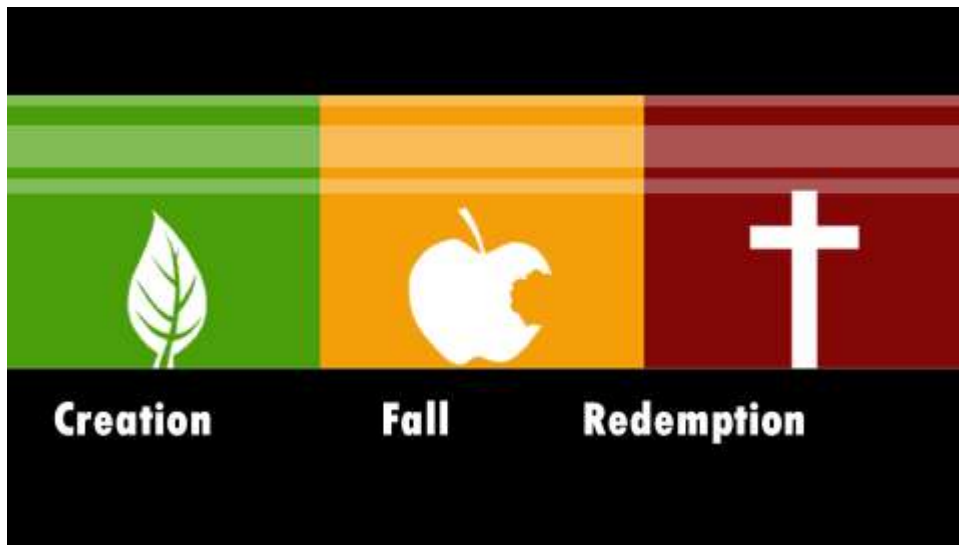
Jesus’ resurrection is the pivotal event in John’s gospel. Take away the resurrection from John’s gospel and everything falls down like a house of cards. Everything stands or falls on Jesus’ resurrection.

When Jesus died on the cross, his disciples must have thought they bet on the wrong horse. They shuffled home as though it was game over. Easter changes everything!

We talk about God’s big story in this church using three words: creation, fall and redemption. It’s the Bible on the back of a napkin, you might say. I wish someone had explained this big story when I was 19 and did not know what to make of Easter.

First word, creation. God creates us for life lived in relationship with God and each other. God forms us from

the raw material of the earth and breathed life into our mortal bodies. Life is what God gives us. Life with God and each other.



Second word, fall. We fall out of relationship with God and each other through something called sin. Sin is not only what people do in Las Vegas. Sin, in the

Bible, is any thought, word or action that separates us from God. This resulting separation from God through sin leads to death. Death consists of eternal separation from God.

Third word, redemption. Redemption is a banking term meaning to *buy back*. God takes the initiative through Jesus Christ to buy us back into relationship. The Bible is a single, overarching story of God rescuing us from sin through Jesus Christ.

Wynton Marsalis is one of the most recognizable jazz musicians of our day. Marsalis was playing his trumpet one night at a New York City nightclub. He began one song with an unaccompanied arrangement of the 1930s jazz ballad, “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You.” The audience soon became enraptured in his trumpet solo.

Then, it happened. Someone’s cell phone went off. It’s silly little ring tune broke the mood. The man with the phone jumped up and went to take the call. Everyone wondered what would happen next. Marsalis started to play the cell phone ring tone. He played it note for note. He played it through several times with different chord

arrangements. The audience settled down again, realizing they were hearing something quite extraordinary. He played the tune several times with various adaptations. Finally, he wound down seamlessly to the last two notes of the previous song: “with you.” The audience erupted with applause.

Just as Wynton Marsalis rescued a song from certain death, so God in Jesus Christ rescues us. Easter changes everything. God raised Christ from death to life again and raises us as believers to life again. Sin is broken. Death is defeated.

John closes chapter 20 with the closest thing to a purpose statement found anywhere in his gospel: “These are written so that you may



These are written so you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing, you may have **life** in his name. 20:31

believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). By believing Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Son of God, we enter into the life God created us to live. Jesus offers life—real life. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly” (10:10).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Some of you may be thinking to yourself, I’m good. I don’t really need Jesus. I wouldn’t be so sure. You are only one major life-altering event away from wishing you had given this Easter message more serious attention. One life-threatening illness; one major crisis; one sudden death; one financial setback; one job loss; one family fallout.

Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed*: “You never know how much you really believe until its truth or falsehood become a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say that you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice? Wouldn’t you then first discover how much you really trusted it?”



Pulitzer Prize winning writer John Updike wrote a poem in 1960 that he entitled *The Seven Stanzas of Easter*. “Make no mistake,” he writes at the outset of the poem, “If He rose at all it was

as His body... Otherwise the church will fall.” His poem urges us not to soften Easter and turn it into some silly little metaphor. He writes near the end of the poem, “Let us walk through the door.”

Consider this sermon as your invitation to open the door of your heart to the risen Jesus. Perhaps he has been knocking on the door of your heart for some time now. The prayer on the screen can help you open the door. If this prayer expresses the desire of your heart, I invite you to pray silently as I pray aloud.

Lord, Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.