

The One That Got Away  
John 20:1-18  
Reverend Anne Benefield  
Geneva Presbyterian Church, March 27, 2016  
Easter Resurrection

**Introduction:** Easter morning holds a surprise – for everyone from the women and the disciples right down to us. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’re as astonished as everyone else. The story is told in all four of the gospels, with slightly different remembrances. The John account is on the lectionary every year along with one of the other gospels, so while the other gospels appear on the lectionary once every three years. The church fathers must have preferred John’s account, too!

**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 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:** Gracious God, we are in church this morning to hear a story that never fails to surprise us. As the women were startled by the unexpected, so we ask You to startle us. Wake us to the reality and power of love in the world and in our lives. Surprise us again, dear God, with the news that death has no power over us, that Jesus Christ is risen and goes on ahead of us. Amen.

One sleepy Sunday afternoon Phil Callaway and his five-year-old son were driving past a cemetery. Noticing a large pile of dirt beside a newly excavated grave, his son pointed and said, "Look, one got away!"

Humor is always created by surprise, that's why it's hard to laugh at a joke you've heard before. Honestly, though, I don't think you could make up a more surprising story than the story we tell during Holy Week. Just think about it:

- Jesus' #1 disciple, the one upon which the church will be built, denies knowing Jesus.
- All the disciples scatter when Jesus, their leader, is arrested.
- Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener.
- Cleopas and his friend don't recognize Jesus until He breaks the bread, even though they had been talking to Him on the road.
- Since Thomas isn't with the disciples when Jesus first comes to them, he says he won't believe unless he puts his fingers through the holes in Jesus' hands.

Why do we keep telling these embarrassing, disappointing stories? The reason is central to our faith: We tell these stories because each of these flawed people was forgiven! Their disloyalty and confusion are stunning, but Jesus forgives them with gracious love. He gives them peace. They are transformed and they go out to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Gospel.

However, on Easter morning for many of us, faith is a little more complicated than that. Allen Walworth of Resource Services, Inc. has an insightful way of understanding our faith using three people in the resurrection story: John (the beloved disciple), Simon Peter, and Mary Magdalene. [Allen Walworth, "Running Through the Cemetery," *PreachingToday*, retrieved 3/23/2016]

Did you notice what happened when Mary told the disciples that the body of Jesus was missing? John and Peter take off running. John gets there first and bends down to look in the tomb. He sees the burial wrappings. When Peter comes John follows him into the tomb. The scripture reads, "then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed..." John responded with a simple faith to the resurrection.

Allen Walworth writes, "An ideal disciple is this beloved one. It doesn't take much to nudge him to faith. No, he did not come thinking that Jesus was raised, but when he got there, it did not take much. You just had to announce it, just whisper it out of an empty tomb. No angels yet, and he believes." [Ibid.]

Among us today are beloved disciples; I know you are here. You come to faith naturally. You have always believed. It is not that you are naïve. You have the gift of an easy faith. And you are a blessing to the rest of us because faith is harder for us.

Many of us respond to the resurrection with struggling faith, like Peter. He looks around at the linens in the tomb and wonders what has happened. He doesn't believe; he is just confused. As Walworth writes, "He had questions, doubts, and concerns, even though he saw the same evidence [that John saw]. [Ibid.]

Some of us, who struggle with faith, look around at the lilies at the foot of the cross, see and hear the choirs, listen to this sermon and we wonder why we don't have a simple faith. Everyone else looks totally committed to the story of the Risen Christ. We might ask, "Why don't I feel that way?"

Sometimes we feel like we are the only person in all of Christendom that doesn't simply believe. The wonderful news is that you are not alone. You are part of this story. You share doubts, questions, and skepticism with Peter.

Peter is a practical man. When you are dead, you are dead. "Something in Simon Peter died when Jesus died." [Ibid.]

This story is to encourage those of us who struggle with faith. Jesus came back to Peter. As Allen Walworth writes:

"But Easter is to say that Jesus is raised and to say that He did come back and He came back especially for people who believed that He couldn't have come back for them. When he came back, Jesus did not up braid Simon. He did not scorch him with a sermon, with an 'I told you so' or 'I knew you'd fail me.' What Jesus came back with was scarred arms, arms to reach around him to say, 'Simon Peter, I love you. I came back to say your failure wasn't the end. You cannot dig a ditch so deep, you cannot run away so far, you cannot accumulate any amount of curses, bad things, or denials that can take you out of reach of my love. If death can't stop me, if they can't nail me down with real nails, you can be sure that you can't get far enough away that my hand can't reach you. Simon Peter, I came back for you. It may take you a while to get that, but I came for you!'" [Ibid.]

Jesus came back to say our failures are not final. That's why we tell those embarrassing stories about how many mistakes the followers made. The mistakes were not the end. Jesus came back. Jesus forgave them. And Jesus forgives us even though we struggle with faith.

Finally, some of us respond to the resurrection with grieving faith. It's the story of Mary Magdalene.

When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, she didn't come for a resurrection. She didn't come for an Easter surprise. She came to mourn. She came to carry on a wake for

her friend. There are some among us who are like Mary. We are grieving. Perhaps because we have lost someone we love. Perhaps we are sick ourselves. Perhaps it's a lost job...a lost relationship...a lost dream.

All this joy and celebration can be hard on us because we are filled with grief. Mary was lost in grief. Even when Jesus came to her, her vision was so blurry with tears that she thought he was the gardener.

Mary is asking where they have taken Him. Then He calls her name. And she recognizes His voice. He had told them that he was the good shepherd and His followers would know His voice.

Mary's grief is transformed to joy. And I believe her joy was greater having experienced her grief.

Our Savior suffered terribly so we would know that no matter how we suffer physically, emotionally, or spiritually, our Lord understands and has experienced our pain. But Jesus came back for us so that we would know that He will never leave us behind.

There's an old tradition that isn't practiced much any more. I found it described as both a Lutheran ritual and an Eastern Orthodox ritual. At the beginning of the Easter sermon the priest was expected to tell a joke. The joke was a reminder to everyone of the joke God played on Satan. On Good Friday, Satan thought he had won, but on Easter morning, the joke was on him. Jesus was resurrected!

Whether we come to Easter with a simple faith, a struggling faith, or a grieving faith, Jesus has come back for us! What an amazing story it is...filled with surprises. Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen.