

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Easter
April 16, 2017

“The Jesus We Weren't Looking For”

John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene is bent over on the ground, looking into the tomb,
She is looking for the dead body of Jesus.
But, Mary doesn't find what she's looking for.

What she sees instead are two angels in white,
sitting where Jesus body has been.
And they ask Mary: *Woman, why are you weeping?*
From her perspective, their question must have seemed
completely clueless, insensitive, out of touch.

But there's little time to explain.
Suddenly, outside the tomb, standing beside her, is Jesus.
We know that, but Mary does not. Mary does not recognize Jesus.
She wasn't looking for him out there, out in the garden,
not like that.

Jesus asks Mary the same question: *Woman, why are you weeping?*
And then he asks, *Whom are you looking for?*
(Now that Jesus has asked it, I suppose we must forgive the angels.)

It is not the first time Jesus has asked this question.

The last time,
he had asked Judas Iscariot
and the soldiers who had come to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane:
“*Whom are you looking for?*”

They said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth,
whom they thought was guilty of blasphemy and sedition
and about to lead an armed uprising to establish himself as King of the Jews.
They did, of course, find Jesus
and they arrested him in Gethsemane,
but the Jesus they found
was nothing like the Jesus they were looking for.
He did not resist, but went with them willingly.

The time before that was much earlier in the gospel story,
when Jesus asks two disciples of John the Baptist
What are you looking for?

They answer, calling him *Rabbi* (which means teacher)
and asking him where he is staying.
He says to them, *come and see*,
so they go with him, and stay with him all that day.

The next day, one of these two disciples, whose name is Andrew, follows Jesus.
Andrew's brother is a man named Simon.
So Andrew goes to his brother Simon and announces to him,
We have found the Messiah. And Simon becomes a disciple of Jesus.

This, of course, is the same Simon Peter,
who in today's reading, once again, at the beckoning of another,
runs in search of his Messiah.

**It is interesting that the question begins as “*What* are you looking for?”
and by the end of the gospel becomes “*Whom* are you looking for?”
It is central to the Christian faith that the “*What*” of our seeking
can only truly be met by a “*Whom*.”**

The object or commodity,
the status or worldly condition,
the “*what*” that we think is our answer,
is really only a mirage in the wilderness.

**But by the grace of God,
in the midst of the mirage of our “*What*”
there stands a “*Whom*”
a risen and living “*Whom*” who meets our deepest longings,
waiting for us to recognize him.**

And so today Jesus asks the question of Mary Magdalene,
Whom are you looking for?
Ironically, she answer's with a *what*:
She's looking for the dead body of the one she thought was the Messiah.

What would your answer be, if Jesus asked you,
What are you looking for? Or whom are you looking for?

It is a question worth asking today, on this Easter Sunday, 2017,
as you and I come to see the empty tomb of Jesus.
**We all approach Easter looking for something,
because we all approach God,
looking for something.**

Maybe you're looking for reassurance that God loves you.
Or you're looking for relief from a guilty conscience —
forgiveness, and a new start.

Or you're looking for a way to make sense of your life.
Or you're looking for someone to comfort you,
to heal your broken body, or soothe your broken heart,
or fix your broken family.
Or you just need to hear some words that ring true, that can be trusted,
in this world in which words and truth
are so often for sale to the highest bidder.
Or your anxiety about this world is getting the better of you,
and you are looking for some assurance
that will calm your fears.

These are perhaps some of the better things we are looking for
when we come to God.

There is, of course, a less noble side to our search for God.
Sometimes we come to God
looking for God's approval of the opinions we already hold,
or God's assurance that we are already good and do not need to change,
or God's agreement that those others are the bad ones
the cause of all our troubles,
and need to be done away with.
The history of Christianity is full of instances when we Christians
have recreated Jesus in our own image
and used Jesus to promote our own agenda,
and even fill our own coffers.

**But whatever we are looking for as we come with Mary to the tomb this morning—
even if you already know the Easter answer
and are looking for a Risen Savior—
we are surely all in for a surprise!**

Jesus will not be confined by the limits we try to impose upon him.
Jesus breaks free of all our expectations.
On Easter we see that our Savior is perfectly free
to be the kind of Savior he will be.
Maybe not the Savior we want, but surely the Savior we need.
When we encounter the risen Jesus in our lives,
it may be a confusing experience at first.
The risen Jesus is too much for us to wrap our minds around.
So it is a natural reaction for us to try to box Jesus into our small understanding,
to squeeze him into the confines of our comfort zone.
Like Mary.

Mary says to Jesus,
*Sir, if you have carried him away,
tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*

The image is repulsive, if you think about it.

But what if Mary had been right?

What if Mary had found the Jesus she was looking for?

What if it had been only the gardener who had spoken to her,
and he'd answered, "Oh, I moved him. He's over here."

Then...there would be Mary...laying hold of Jesus' dead body...
...and dragging his corpse away.

**I wonder how often you and I try to lug around a dead Jesus
instead of recognizing the living Jesus who is standing beside us.**

When it feels like life is a cruel joke that God has played on you,
and you can't imagine why things have turned out the way they have.

When faith becomes old, worn out religion,
just fulfilling our obligations, like a woman in mourning,
going to the tomb to anoint a body,
because that's what you do.

It's easy to get stuck in a spiritual rut,
where we think we have figured out just who God should be for us,
and what God should do for us,
and for our families, and for our world?

**Have you figured out just how Jesus should save you,
if he really wants to be your Savior?**

The disciples had figured out just how Jesus should save them:
...throw off the Roman oppressors and establish a new Jewish kingdom.

What about you? What must Jesus do to be your Savior?

...smooth out the conflicts in your life?
...take away the sickness from your body?
...find you a better job...or any job, for that matter?
...fix, or do away with, that person who is the thorn in your flesh?
...get this or that person or party elected?
...get guns off the streets...or get more guns on the streets?
...get rid of ISIS...North Korea...make the whole world Christian...?

**We get these ideas about who our Savior should be,
and what he should do,
and then we are driven to despair
when we see those expectations nailed to a cross,
and buried in a tomb.**

Then we become like Mary, in the early morning of the third day;
the Savior of our dreams is dead to us.

All that's left for us is to lug around his dead body,
wishing he were alive.

But now it is Easter morning,
and it is time to come to terms
with the Savior who will not let us drag him around,
with the God who will not be bound by the limits of our imagination.

**Now it is Easter morning,
and standing there before us in the garden
is not the Jesus we were looking for,
but the Jesus we really need,**
the risen, living Jesus,
who is doing a new thing in our lives and in the world,
a new thing beyond our expectations,
beyond anything we can comprehend and imagine.

Jesus loves Mary, and he doesn't leave her in agony for long
though it must have felt to her like a lifetime.

What happens next makes all the difference.

**Jesus calls Mary by name,
and when she hears him speak her name
something changes inside her.**

She turns to him, and the veil over her eyes is torn away,
and she sees – she really sees.

Still, old expectations are hard to break.

She wants to hold on to him, she wants to cling to him.

She wants to have back the Jesus that she knew,
or thought she knew.

But Jesus is who he is, and will be who he will be.

He is headed back to the Father.

That is his purpose now. That is where he belongs.

So he says to Mary, *Do not hold on to me.*

Don't try to squeeze me back into your box.

And being clear about his own purpose,
Jesus wants Mary to be clear about hers.

Now that she has seen her risen Lord,

Mary is to go to the other disciples and tell them what she has seen,

tell them who she found in the garden

when she didn't find what she was looking for.

Mary may be returning to the same life she had before,
the same people, the same places, the same things, the same routines,
**but now she goes with a new hope, and a new purpose,
because she goes having seen the risen Jesus.**

**That is what Easter finally does –
at least for those who recognize the risen Jesus.
Jesus sends us to become witnesses of what we have seen,
and show in our lives
the one whom we have come to know.**

Probably most of you didn't come here today looking for something else to do.
Life has you pretty tied up already.
Maybe you came just looking for a happy, springtime, thought for the day...
Or maybe you're one of our dear friends
who just comes to church on Easter and maybe Christmas.
Well, if that's the case, we are very glad you're here today,
but I have to say –
you sure could have picked a less *dangerous* Sunday
to come to church
than the Sunday when God raises Jesus from the dead!

If we came today pretty sure of what we're looking for,
without expecting very much to change in our lives,
then it's still possible for us to leave today
without recognizing Jesus,
without actually hearing Jesus speak our name.
The gardener may remain just the gardener for us.

If the Jesus you think you know doesn't **challenge** your understanding of him,
there's a good chance you haven't met the risen Lord.

If the Jesus you think you know doesn't **change** anything about your plans,
there's a good chance you haven't met the risen Lord.

If the Jesus you think you know doesn't **send** you to do anything hard,
there's a good chance you haven't met the risen Lord.

But if, today...or someday soon...Jesus encounters you and speaks your name...
[pause and listen]
...and gives you a new purpose,
then let go of the dead body you've been dragging around
and go where he sends you.

**It's the Jesus you weren't looking for...
...the Jesus you never could have expected...
...who will show you the way to abundant life.
Happy Easter!**