

Easter C Sermon  
John 20:1-18  
April 17, 2022

*The Power of Surprise*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*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. <sup>2</sup>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.' <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>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; <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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.' <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you*

*weeping? For whom are you looking?’ 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.’<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to God. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’<sup>18</sup> 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.*

~o~

A couple of years ago I had the most brilliant idea for an Easter children’s sermon. Forgive my lack of modesty, but it was a really good idea. To illustrate the wonder of the empty tomb, we’d use an egg and at the climax of the story, we’d smash it between our palms to reveal that it was empty. That’s a really good idea right? Of course, this plan hinged on ensuring that all of the yolk and egg whites had been carefully blown out by creating two tiny holes in the shell, one at the top, and one at the bottom. A dear older woman had volunteered to deliver the children’s sermon so I just needed to get things ready. As we were preparing for the Easter festivities the Saturday before, I tasked one of the youth with preparing the egg. He was a calculating and precise young man and I knew that he would be equal to the task.

The children clung to her every word as the older woman reached closer and closer to the climax of the story. Then, in a move that caught kids and congregation by complete surprise, she brought her palms together and smashed the egg to bits in one grand gesture. It was beautiful. The looks on their faces, the almost-terror in their eyes as she crushed this venerated Easter symbol to reveal that it was empty of yolk or white. But, it hadn’t been empty after all. As palms met and shattered the shell, a gooey

mixture of yolk and white oozed between her fingers, splattered her Easter dress, and clung in dripping gobs to her eye lashes and perfectly coiffed hair. “Oh no!” I thought. Easter surprises us again!

At its core, that is truly where the power of Easter lies – in its ability to surprise us, unsettle us, challenge what we believe about life and what we know to be true about death.

- Imagine Mary Magdalene’s surprise as she rounded the corner and saw the cave where Jesus had been laid, with the great boulder at its mouth rolled away.
- Imagine the surprise of the disciple that Jesus loved as he discovered the wrappings that had bound Jesus’ body, lying discarded on a slab of stone.
- Imagine Peter’s surprise as he found the very cloth that had covered Jesus’ face, rolled up in a place by itself.
- Imagine Mary’s surprise as, once again, she looked back in the tomb after the disciples had left to find two angels sitting there.
- Imagine the angels’ surprise as Mary, completely nonplussed by their presence, turned to leave.
- Imagine Mary’s final surprise when the gardener called her by name, revealing himself as none other than her beloved teacher.
- Imagine the disciples’ surprise when Mary, returned from an empty tomb in a garden of memories, filled with conviction, preaching the wild news of the resurrected Christ.

At its core, its ability to disorient, to confuse, to upend our empirical minds, our rational conclusions, the very laws of life and death that govern nature—to turn the world itself upside down and call it right side up—at its core, its ability to surprise, is truly where the power of Easter lies. Does it still surprise you? Does it still surprise us, here at New England Church? How will we respond to the surprise?

One of the truly wonderful things about the version of the Easter story from the Gospel According to John is that there is a place at the resurrection tomb for each of us and for our unique responses to the story. On the one hand, the author tells us that the disciple Jesus loved saw the grave clothes and the empty tomb and simply believed. On the other hand, Peter saw the grave clothes and the empty tomb and left the place, a skeptic. On the third hand, if that's possible, Mary wept and then heard the resurrected one call her by name and left the place with a heart full of love and the proclamation of good news on her lips.

The power of Easter lies in its ability to surprise us. Some will see and believe, though not necessarily believe the same thing or the same way. Others of us will see and leave uncertain. And still others of us need to hear our own name, called out by one who called forth the dead from their own tombs, called out to God in moments of despair, and called out blessings on children. John's version of the Easter story leaves room for all of us: for joy-filled belief, and thought-filled skepticism, and unhindered proclamation of good news in word and in deed. The power of the Easter story rests in its ability to surprise, to challenge, to confound, to reshape, and reenergize, and renew, but if we walk away from the empty tomb and the sight doesn't engage us...then it has no power at all.

Be engaged by the story. Let the empty tomb open you to belief, to skepticism, to proclamation, but most of all, to surprise. Let Easter surprise you today, and tomorrow, and every day. Amen.