

“No Going Back.” An Easter Sermon

Co-Missioners,

For this week we asked the Rev. Dr. Steven Albertin, a recently retired ELCA pastor, to look through his files for the Easter sermon he was most glad to have preached over his decades in the pulpit. Here it is. God grant that it shoves some Easter steel into your hearts too. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Steve, by the way, is one of our semi-regular contributors and a long-time member of the Crossings board. He is married to Ann. They live in Indianapolis.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

No Going Back

by Rev. Dr. Steven Albertin



John 20:1-18 (NRSV)–

¹ 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. ² 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.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ 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.’” ¹⁸ 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.

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Today is the most important day of the church year. It is also the only day of the church year that is determined by the rhythms and flow of nature, specifically the lunar cycle. It is this rhythm of nature that determines the date of Easter, the church’s great movable feast. Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the Spring equinox. You are all going to remember that, right?

This dating of Easter in the spring of the year makes good sense. At this time of the year the earth is greening. The sap is rising. Bulbs are sending their green shoots through the pours of the warming soil. Winter is ending and new life is springing forth everywhere. Easter seems to fit right in with the endless cycle of nature that inevitably, every spring, resurrects new life from the dead of winter.

It seems that Easter confirms what is built into nature and the essence of reality. Contrary to appearances, even though caterpillars, trees and plants seem to die, inevitably life endures. Even though there is much suffering and death in this world, life is eternal and will never end.

Right? Wrong! This is not Easter. Easter is not about the endless and inevitable cycle of life. Resurrection is not

natural and built into the nature of reality. Resurrection and specifically the resurrection of Jesus is utterly unnatural! It is always an aberration, a surprise. It is never what we expected.

If there is anything that is natural and inevitable in this world it is not life but death. Death is always final. I don't know about you, but I have never been to a burial at the cemetery where the mourners stand around waiting for the deceased to come back to life. If there ever is any springtime in the cemetery, it happens only *on* the graves and never *in* the graves.

These are the same feelings that must have been going on in Mary Magdalene's heart as she returned to Jesus' tomb to grieve early on that Sunday morning. She had made this journey to make her private farewell. Perhaps alone with the body of her master she could better accept the finality of it all. Jesus was dead and there was no way to change that. She now had to try to swallow that bitter pill. The darkness of the pre-dawn morning fit her mood.



But something was wrong. As she entered the garden and approached the tomb, she smelled the odor of damp earth. She felt the cold air of an underground cave chilling her face. Then in that pre-dawn haze, she was barely able to make out the shadowy entrance to the tomb. The large rock sealing door had been rolled away. She rushed to look inside and her worst fears were confirmed. Jesus body was gone! How could this have happened? Jesus' enemies must have done it.

Frightened and desperate, she runs to get two of Jesus' closest

disciples, Peter and John, to show them what had happened. They run to the tomb and confirm what Mary had told them. Disconsolate, they go home, leaving Mary behind at the empty tomb. Like an abandoned puppy who has been left behind by its master and stubbornly remains rooted in that place waiting, whimpering and hoping that its master would soon return, Mary remains rooted at the entrance to the tomb, refusing to leave, waiting, whimpering and hoping that someone will return Jesus' missing body. She is so confused and bewildered that she remains unaffected by two angels sitting there who wonder why she is crying. All Mary can do is lament that someone has taken away Jesus' body.

Mary is on autopilot. Her grief is so consuming that, when she sees the gardener, she does not even recognize that it is Jesus. All she can do is talk about Jesus' missing body: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Then something happens that catches Mary completely by a surprise. It is something she never expected. It is utterly unnatural. Mary hears a voice, a voice that sounds familiar, a voice that calls her by name: "Mary." Her eyes are opened! Then she recognizes who it is who stands there. It is not the gardener. It is Jesus! He is alive! Shocked and filled with joy, she utters the only word she can think of, the word she had always used to express her love and admiration for Jesus: "Rabbouni!" which means "Teacher."

You can just imagine how Hollywood would love to portray this reunion. Mary, recognizing that the gardener is in fact Jesus, runs in slow motion, arms open, a smile on her face, tears cascading down her cheeks and leaps into the arms of Jesus. Bursting with joy, she hugs and embraces her long-lost friend. Then she and Jesus return hand in hand to their former life

joyfully wandering the Judean countryside as part of the ever growing and popular Jesus Movement. They live happily ever after.

But this is not what happens. Instead Jesus responds to Mary in a most odd and peculiar way. Warding off her embrace he says, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Something is wrong here. Somehow, Mary's response to Jesus is inappropriate. It was is word that Mary has used to address Jesus, "Rabbouni," the teacher! That word refers to Jesus' old identity. That word was Jesus "Friday name." This is Sunday morning. This is the new, resurrected Jesus. Jesus has changed. There can be **no going back** to the way things used to be.

Whatever Jesus' resurrection means, it at least means that there is **no going back**. Jesus' resurrection does not mean going back to "the way we were." That is what a resuscitation would mean. If the Jesus standing there before Mary was just the resuscitated Jesus, then that would mean the return of the same old world still ruled by death. Remember, Lazarus had been resuscitated. It was the same old Lazarus come back to life. Lazarus lived in the same old world. Lazarus eventually died and stayed dead. The world had not changed because Lazarus had only been resuscitated.

But this is a resurrection and not a resuscitation! And resurrection means the advent of a whole new unnatural world. Resurrection means that Jesus is going to the Father and taking the whole world with him. Resurrection means the arrival of a new future, the coming of a whole new world, no longer limited by the inevitable threat of death. Unlike Lazarus Jesus didn't die again. Jesus still lives!



Resurrection is something totally new. It is not a part of the natural and inevitable cycle of life and death. Jesus does not want Mary to hold on to that old world and that old Jesus. This is a new world and new Jesus. There can be ***no going back***. Mary, “do not hold on to me.”

If Jesus’ resurrection means that something totally new and unnatural has broken into this world, then we should not be surprised that all the reports in the four Gospels of the discovery of the empty tomb are marked with fear. In each case, the first response of those discovering the empty tomb is fear. They are scared. They never expected this. They had expected to find a tomb...but they found angels. They went to embrace the past and their memories of Jesus...but instead discovered the future. They went looking for a body...but instead got the risen Lord.

Most of all they went expecting the same, old, natural, death riddled world to be confirmed and reinforced. They had grown to accept that world and even be comfortable with a world that had limits, a world governed by certain inevitabilities: you get what you deserve; there are no free lunches; everyone must die; no one gets out alive; no one bypasses the cemetery; survivors must always grieve, mourn and accept the inevitable, natural course of things. And a large stone has sealed us in a tomb and a world from which there is no escape.

But—and what a huge “But” it is— the stone has been rolled away! Something unnatural, unexpected and new has happened. A new world has arrived. There is ***no going back!*** Who would *want* to go back to that kind of world anyway? This whole new world is opened to us when Jesus speaks his word to us. When the living and resurrected Jesus speaks to us in Word and Sacrament, He invites us to let go of this old world and its inevitable and inexorable cycle of death. He invites us to let go of him...so that he can take hold of us and take us into the new and

unnatural world of the Kingdom of God.

In this new and unnatural world inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus, new, unprecedented and even unnatural things can begin to happen. People no longer always have to get what they deserve. We no longer live in fear, always worried about “what’s in it for me?” Instead, sins are forgiven. The other cheek is turned. Selfless deeds of charity are offered with no expectation of getting anything in return. Time is volunteered in service of others. Money is freely offered to the needy with no questions asked. Walking the extra mile with a stranger is not a burden but a privilege. Faith moves mountains. Nothing seems impossible.

But just like Mary and those first arrivals to the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, this is scary. Yet Jesus stands before us today and says, “That’s OK. I am ascending to the Father. I am going ahead of you, leading you into a new future. It is in my hands, the hands of one whom not even death could keep down. In those hands, my hands, you have nothing to fear.”

And just when we think we are losing our way, just when we are having second thoughts and are thinking about going back to where we assume it is warm and safe (but actually tepid and stifling), he calls us by name. “Mary, John, Connie, Bill—trust me. There is ***no going back***. We are moving forward. Fear not! I know your name. I will never forget you! Welcome to a whole new world.”

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community