

### **Where Are We Going? (Part Four)**

*Northminster Presbyterian Church: Easter Sunday, Year C (2007)*

*Reading of the lessons: Acts 10<sup>34-43</sup>; John 20<sup>1-18</sup>*

We started out Holy Week with Lenny Kravitz asking, “Where are we running?” It is still an apt question. Nothing has happened as we expected it. Christ rides in as King, but where are the troops, the generals, the show of power? What’s with the donkey and the cries for peace? Not what you usually think of for an inauguration. Christ celebrates the Passover meal, but where’s the help? Instead of acting like a host, Christ acts like a slave. Christ overturns the aggressive government powers and puts those obnoxious religious people in their place, but what’s with the cross? How do you free people when you’re dead? Is this the end of the road?

The BBC has a new television series—“Robin Hood”. In a recent episode, our hero turns himself over to the Sheriff of Nottingham to stop the Sheriff from, you know, cutting out people’s tongues. Maid Marian sneaks into Nottingham Castle to see Robin and she gives him—ahem—a good tongue-lashing. There are so many people that need saving, Marian says, and here you have given yourself up to the Sheriff. Robin says he is acting on principle. “Principle is making a difference,” Marian fumes, “and you can’t make a difference when you’re dead.” That’s certainly the disciples’ thoughts on the matter, despondent as they must be those awful moments after the crucifixion and that terrible Saturday which surely must have crept by. On Sunday, even before dawn cracks, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, no doubt to pay her respects. Remember Mary—the girl, as Rick James says, you don’t take home to mother? The one who, two weeks ago, acted like a slave to serve Christ? The woman who threw caution to the wind and uncovered herself to anoint Jesus? The one whose judgment is a little dubious? The one

whose faith isn't? When Mary sees that the stone has been rolled away from Christ's tomb, she goes to tell Peter and John that grave robbers have stolen his body—a common occurrence in the first century Roman Empire. John and Peter sprint toward the tomb to see what's going on. Eugene Burnand captures the moment magnificently. In his painting "Peter and John Running to the Tomb", Peter has his hand over his heart, his brow is furrowed with mourning and fear, while his eyes gleam with a hint of—can it be hope? John's face is drawn with sorrow and his hands are wrung together as he runs. His desperate face shows the logic of what he knows he will find; his tense hands hold the promise of what his faith hopes to find. Following after Christ is no easy matter, Christians. On one day, we believe; on another day, we doubt; on some days, we do both.

Peter and John arrive at the tomb and Peter goes in. But what's this? Grave robbers aren't usually meticulous people. They don't often wrap the funeral garments up in a nice stack and leave them neatly positioned in the tomb. John follows Peter in and when he sees the linen wrappings, he believes something, but he's not sure what. Surely, the Buffalo Springfield song originated with John: "There's something happening here; what it is ain't exactly clear." There's something happening here; what it is ain't exactly clear. And so, Peter and John, befuddled, desperate, hopeful, anxious, return home.

Mary doesn't return home. Mary—the problem child for the religious people, the poster child for the faithful disciples—stays outside the tomb, weeping. Contorted with sobbing, she bends over to look into the tomb and sees—angels. Maybe the people who see angels are the ones who weep for the things God weeps for. Or maybe the people who see angels are the ones who never give up, the ones who stay, searching, when

everyone else has gone back home. Or maybe the people who see angels are the ones everyone else has given up on, the ones who know just how priceless a thing grace really is. Mary sees angels. Then she turns around and sees Jesus. Aha! The journey is not over! Christ is alive! He is risen!

Only Mary doesn't yet know it's Jesus. She thinks he's the gardener. Christ asks her for whom she is looking. It is the same question he asked the guards and soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane only a couple of days ago now: For whom are you looking? Mary starts blubbing some nonsense about carrying Jesus away and laying him somewhere and taking him somewhere else. Which is understandable. We all stammer a bit when we're anxious or depressed or have teenagers. Then Christ calls Mary by name. What's in a name? When we have a child, we claim her as our own by naming her. The first step of the twelve step process is to name the demon we fight. Adam is put into the Garden of Eden and he is told to name all creation. What's in a name? Everything. Mary doesn't know it's Christ until he calls her by name. We don't know Christ until he calls us by name.

Mary grabs Christ and holds on for dear life. She has been searching for Jesus and now she has him—and she's not about to let go. But Jesus says she has to. He is getting ready to leave. No, he's not going to die again—like Jason Voorhees who dies in any number of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> movies just to come back again just to die again—no, Jesus is leaving to go to his Father. It is dangerous to think, Christians, that since Christ is risen from the grave, everything goes back to the way it was before, as though the crisis has been averted and we can all just get on with our lives—the way a guy who has had a quadruple bypass goes back to eating chili dogs and sitting on the couch watching

“Dancing With the Stars”, as though nothing ever happened. No! The resurrection is not a reversal of the cross; it is not an avoidance of the cross; it is the fulfillment of the cross; it is the proclamation of the cross. The resurrection is the thirty foot by twenty foot Times Square Jumbotron sign that announces to the whole world that sin and death are powerless against God’s love. Because of God’s love for us, Christ died for us and he was raised for us. And there was the Father, through it all.

U2’s Easter song says: “The rule has been disproved; the stone, it has been moved; the grave is now a groove; all debts are removed. Oh, can’t you see what love has done—what it’s done to me?” Christ takes us from the Ash Wednesday of death through the Lent of confession on to the Palm Sunday processional of peace, then around the Maundy Thursday Table of love and up to the cross of acquiescence and sacrifice and on to life. And there is our Father, every step of the way. Christ takes us from the death of failing marriages, wayward kids, stalled careers, broken promises, difficult parents, shattered dreams, regretted decisions—and he turns them into life. That’s the journey we are on, Christians. A journey where we travel through the myriad little burial tombs we find ourselves in and out into the life that Christ gives. We don’t go back to the way things were—why would we want to? Christ’s resurrection shoves us forward into the way of life. And there is our Father, every step of the way.

This morning, Christians, I want you to cut through all the festivity for just a moment—all the Easter basket Peeps and the Easter buffet reservations (yes, I’ll get you out on time! 🍷), and I want you to think of that place in your world that is tomb-dark and death-cold. I want you to focus on that thing that you have been avoiding, that place that you steer clear of as much as possible. When you take the bread and the cup of our

Lord's Supper, think of that place. Receive Christ's grace. Know that your Father is with you every step of the way. Believe that Christ conquers all death and is the Lord of all life. "The rule has been disproved; the stone, it has been moved; the grave is now a groove; all debts are removed." Oh, can't you see what Love has done? Can't you see what Love has done to us? Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Alleluia! Amen.