

“Who Are You Looking For?”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

“Who are you looking for?” An Easter tradition, which goes back to pagan, spring equinox rituals, is the Easter egg hunt. We will have one after worship today. The egg symbolizes new life: possibility breaking out of its shell. But the *seeking* is part of the fun, too. I hosted a little Easter egg hunt for my English Conversation Family class last week. We dyed eggs first– for all of them, children and parents– it was their first time dying Easter eggs. And what fun it is to watch little kids hunt for Easter eggs. They walk right past the egg– which is in plain view– over and over, until a look of recognition and wonder spreads over their face: “I found it!” These children were speaking to their moms in Japanese, but you don’t have to understand Japanese to recognize the delight on a child’s face when something lost has been found.

I heard some complaining from some cranky neighbors on our town’s listserv about Easter and spring traditions in Leonia. They were unhappy that some of our Muslim neighbors put up a banner saying “Happy Ramadan” in our town, for the first time ever, in conjunction with an educational event about Ramadan held a couple weeks ago. These few voices that make loud noise said this isn’t fair, and that Leonia is favoring one religion over another because Leonia now calls its Easter Egg hunt with Easter bunny a “spring celebration” and “egg hunt”-- leaving out the word Easter.

As for me, I’m not concerned that my town isn’t taking on the teaching about Easter through eggs and bunnies. I figure our churches and families are best left with the task of what Easter really means. As far as Leonia is concerned, they are actually right– eggs and bunnies *do* originally come from spring festivals and pagan traditions, not biblical accounts of Jesus. The word Easter even comes from the name of a Nordic goddess of the dawn.

Still, we who are Easter people are not completely unlike those children who were looking in the church garden, hunting for eggs for the first time in their lives. We can all ask ourselves, what *are* we looking for, when we come to church to sing Alleluia and greet the risen Christ?

Jesus asks this question of Mary: “Who are you looking for?”

For Mary, it begins like a dream. Who among us knows the feeling of waking up from a dream, and still not being able to discern what is real, and what was part of your dream?

Before the darkness of the night lifts, Mary makes her way through the city streets. I am not certain what first century Jerusalem was like, but it seems to me that for women in a lot of times and places, traveling through the city in darkness is not always a safe choice. Add to that that

Mary was a known disciple of one just executed, and the danger seems even more palpable. And yet. The desire to be near the one she loved compelled her so intensely, even darkness could not keep her from seeking closeness to his body.

Perhaps dimness still hung over that garden where Jesus had been buried. Or maybe morning was already splashing the skies in hues of red, pink, orange and gold. Either way, when Mary saw that the stone had been rolled away, instead of staying to investigate, she ran to her friends, Peter and Jesus' beloved disciple. That way, whatever the reality was— a true removal of Jesus' body, or her mind playing tricks on her when the veil between darkness and light, dream and reality was still thin— Mary would have companions to face the truth with her.

After hearing Mary's announcement— "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him"— Peter and the beloved disciple have a foot race to the tomb. It strikes me that Peter does *not* win in this instance— Peter, who is always trying to prove his love and discipleship to Jesus. But the one who arrives there first is the beloved disciple. John doesn't say who that is, but many scholars suppose it's self-referring to the writer of John's gospel: John the Evangelist.

Yes, the majority of people think the guy who wrote the Gospel According to John wrote himself in as Jesus' beloved disciple. Maybe it's a placeholder— as if we could, any of us, write ourselves in as that beloved disciple as well.

But another interpretation I find intriguing comes with the guess that the Beloved Disciple refers to Lazarus. Remember Lazarus, whom the gospels describes as a man Jesus loved? Remember how he became ill and died before Jesus could even get to see him? Remember how Jesus wept at his tomb, but then called to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus came out, still bound in his clothes of death. Jesus had to command, "Unbind him, and let him go," before Lazarus could be truly free of death.

If the beloved disciple was, in fact, Lazarus, then I can understand why he would have raced more swiftly than Peter— who probably still had echoes of a rooster crowing in his ear from after the third time he had betrayed Jesus. Lazarus knew for himself what death looked and felt like, maybe even *smelled* like, and so he was ready to show up for his friend.

But when the beloved disciple got there, he stood outside the tomb, peeking in, and saw the linen wrappings lying there. *Unlike* Lazarus, who had risen from the dead but was still bound in the clothing of the dead, it seems that Jesus rose without the bindings of death clothes.

Peter, on the other hand, went straight *into* the tomb to check things out. He also saw the linen wrappings, and the cloth that had covered Jesus' head, neatly rolled inside the tomb.

It's kind of like when you are a houseguest: upon leaving, do you leave the bed messed up, thinking, "well, it has to be cleaned anyway?" Do you make up the bed? Do you strip the bed

and take the sheets to the wash? I'm not sure what Jesus was *wearing* after he rose from the dead, but he sure seemed to be neat about the death clothes he no longer needed.

Mary, who had first discovered the stone rolled away, stays by the tomb, alone. Suspended somewhere between darkness and dawn, Mary is still trying to make sense of things she does not understand.

Unlike Peter and the beloved disciple, who had looked in the tomb and believed, Mary was stuck there— at that place of death— and still suspended in her trauma and grief. Maybe Peter and the other disciple were certain that they saw all they needed to see at the tomb, and— assuming there was nothing left there for them— went on their way.

Interestingly, it was to Mary— not to Peter and the beloved disciple— that the resurrected Christ first appeared. Peter and the beloved disciple looked in the empty tomb and believed— the gospel doesn't say exactly *what* they believed— and then went home. But Mary lingered at the tomb. And it's in her lingering, in that place that is still somewhere between darkness and daylight in her mind, that she becomes the first one to be blessed with an appearance of the resurrected Christ.

It's similar to the miracle of the burning bush. Rabbinic literature notes that the fact that there was a bush burning that wasn't being consumed isn't the **only** miracle that happened on Mount Sinai. No, the rabbis say that the other miracle is that Moses stayed long enough, gazing at that burning bush, to *notice* that it was burning without being consumed. How long did it take him to realize that the bush wasn't turning to ash from heat and fire? It was only after Moses lingered for a while, that he received the blessing of Yahweh speaking to him and giving him instruction that would help him liberate his people.

Mary lingered; maybe it was her lack of understanding of just what had happened that caused her not to wrap up and head home. She stayed— in her confusion, in her grief, in her longing...

...And then: she noticed that two angels appeared where Jesus had lain— one where his head would have been, and one where his feet would have been.

A Jewish rabbi, Amy Robertson, upon reading this part of the gospel, comments that the angels introduced into this story evokes the two cherubim, the two angels, that are described in the Torah as beside the Ark in the Holy of Holies, surrounding the empty seat upon which Israelite religion believed God's glory dwelled.

God's presence was once in the Temple, in the Ark, upon the Holy of Holies¹. Now, it is where Jesus' body *used* to be— not in the living body of Jesus, but in the resurrected Jesus who isn't even physically with us anymore. Jesus is present in the intermingling of holiness and death—

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm*.
<https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-338-come-to-the-tomb-john-201-18/>

and these are no longer as two separate worlds that are battling each other; one feeds into the other, and that feeds into life.

Mary sees this emptiness, and when she sees someone else there— whom she thinks is the gardener, she is still weeping. “Woman, why do you weep?” He asks her.

“*Who are you looking for?*” he continues. In Aramaic, the translation reads more accurately as “*Who do you want?*” What are your expectations when you come here on Easter morning to bear witness?

Mary doesn’t recognize him. She thinks Jesus is the gardener. She sees in the daylight, but her recognition is still dim. She even suggests that perhaps the gardener has taken Jesus, and asks him where he has taken her.

“Mary.”

It’s the speaking of Mary’s name that shifts everything- it’s her turning point for being able to recognize Jesus.

This is a really cosmic moment. It’s when it becomes clear that Jesus has overcome death. He has subverted imperial power by showing its ways of violence and domination don’t get the last word. For us today, it’s a time when we get the brass. We let the Alleluias out of the box. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “Easter says to us that despite everything to the contrary, his will for us will prevail, love will prevail over hate, justice over injustice and oppression, peace over exploitation and bitterness.”

But it’s also a very quiet, personal moment.

Maybe you didn’t even know what, or who you came here today seeking. But you showed up. I invite you to linger in this space— long after we have cleared the sanctuary, after the children among us crash from their sugar rush, after the spectacle of the sun’s brightness today turns again to darkness.

Linger. And wait. And wonder— even if, especially if, you are grieving, if you are doubting, if you are confused. Find again that place between dazzling daylight and the dim of darkness. Linger, and maybe you will hear Jesus speak *your* name, and ask you, Who are you looking for?