

**He Must Rise from the Dead**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**Easter March 23, 2008**  
**Text: John 20:1-18**

I see him at odd times, late in a weekday afternoon, or early Saturday morning. He walks across Andersen Hall with purpose, but not eagerly, and I hear his soft footsteps climbing the carpeted stairs to the little room beside my office: the upper-level columbarium, final resting place for urns holding the ashes of our beloved dead. He stops in front of one of the wood-paneled niches, and I remain at my desk, so as not to disturb the shimmering silence. Yet I know what he is doing, for I have done the same myself. He reaches out and touches oh-so-gently the brass plate bearing her name; remembers the way she tilted her head just so, the fire of her eyes when angry, the sound of her full-throated laughter. Scenes crowd his mind...the story of their life together. It's finished now; at least the part that included her. She's gone. He stays a little longer, and then I hear the quiet creak of floorboards as he descends, carefully, slowly, making his way back into the world without her.

The good news of Easter begins in a cemetery. Mary Magdalene comes very early to mourn the loss of her beloved teacher and friend. No doubt the memories flooding over her threaten to drown her in sorrow. He's gone. It's finished now.

It's important that we start here in the place of death and decay because it is real. You and I know exactly how it is. The good news of Easter does not depend upon the denial of death, and so as we read this account of its dawning light, let us approach the graves in our lives.... for loved ones who have died; the niches holding ashes of dreams that have vanished, hopes that have been pried from us from forces beyond our control, or simply crumbled in our hands. Let us stand at the graves of young men and women lost in war, and the ones lost to violence in their own city...let us, with Mary, come to these sad tombs to remember and grieve for all that is lost.

In his novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* John Steinbeck has a character marvel at the connection between remembrance and reality, between the past and the present:

*Aunt Deborah read the Scripture to me like a  
daily newspaper and I suppose that's the way  
she thought of it, as something going on,  
happening eternally but always exciting and new.*

*Every Easter, Jesus really rose from the dead, an explosion, expected but nonetheless new. It wasn't two thousand years ago to her; it was now.*

How would we read this ancient story if we believed it was now? --today, just barely beyond a winter that saw more than its share of discontent? What would it say to us as a blazing headline in the *Plain Dealer*? Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to John in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter at the first verse.

[JOHN 20:1-18]

*He must rise from the dead.* The gospel's omniscient narrator lets the readers in on the secret before it is discovered by Jesus' friends. The disciples Simon Peter and John, on the force of Mary Magdalene's breathless report that Jesus' tomb is missing its contents, check things out for themselves. They enter, see the discarded grave cloths, and "believe"—but only that Mary isn't lying or crazy. It is as she has reported. The gospel narrator says they didn't understand that Jesus *must* rise from the dead. Yet.

Mary, too, is confused and troubled by what she finds—or actually, what she *doesn't* find at the grave. Her mind quickly flips through the possibilities: someone—friends? enemies? the gardener? --has taken the body away. Apparently she does not even consider resurrection among possible scenarios.

Still the narrator insists, *He must rise from the dead.* *He must?* But why? The Greek verb form here is the strongest it could possibly be; another legitimate translation is "he had to rise from death." But did he have to? Many wise and noble teachers have died and they are still dead. We have learned from them, been inspired by their teaching, even tried to pattern our lives after them. But they did not rise from death.

It's not natural. Nothing about Easter is natural. We Midwesterners are so tired of winter and long for the light of lengthening days and moderating temperatures of Spring (not to mention a brand new baseball season!). It's so tempting to draw a line between thawing of the frozen world and the opening grave, between the hardy crocuses pushing bravely through the snow into bloom and Jesus stepping out of the darkness into the dawning day; between the return of Spring and resurrection. My friend Ellen who has spent time in Uruguay likes to remind me that in the Southern Hemisphere Easter occurs in Autumn, just as the natural world is dying, flowers have faded, the earth lies fallow. The analogy doesn't work. And though the warming earth and fragrant spring flowers may help us experience a sense of renewal after a

weariness winter, we should not equate that with Easter. The natural world cycles through the seasons in regular rhythm. Jesus' resurrection broke the cycle of nature. His body was not a planted seed that grew into the light of day. He died, and then, contradicting everything we know of the natural world and conventional wisdom, he rose from death and *lives*.

Perhaps the most compelling proof of Jesus' resurrection is the transformation of his first followers from weeping, woeful mourners into bold witnesses who went everywhere and told his story, shared his teaching, and built a community of hope with people who were sick and tired, hungry, lost, and searching for a home. It's certain that the community of Christians would not have survived more than a generation with a compelling and continuous experience of Christ's living presence. But they didn't get it at first. Their experience of the risen Lord was not sparked by faith, but by their doubt, their questions, and even their disbelief. That first Easter revealed to Mary and the disciples the reality beyond reason; the truth that transcends human knowledge and intellect. Resurrection is what still animates the Church and renews its life. That's why we use the present tense to proclaim the good news: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!

We gather here not simply to remember a singular event of long ago. Christ is risen....*today*. We celebrate not another day, but a new day. Everything is different now. And we are invited, we are called, to live in that new day. Admittedly, it's a mystery. The fragile new day seems utterly threatened by the daily, deadly headlines: endless war, financial instability, environmental breakdown, poverty, injustice, fearful violence. Like Mary, we grieve and question. Like the disciples, we doubt how this can be and wonder what's really going on. But maybe, friends, Easter happens to us, as it did to them, in those moments when we least expect it. Not on this high holy day when the music is triumphant and our guy won. Perhaps Easter will overtake us on the day we hit the wall, come to the end of our rope, lose control....and discover that God's love outlives and outlasts any force that threatens to destroy or hurt us.

A woman who is a member of this church recently described her first Easter. She had just turned 40, with a couple of children and a very shaky marriage . . . and then discovered she was pregnant. "I was in despair," she told me. "I didn't know where to turn, what I could do, how I could possibly make this right." In deep despondency, she recalled that she hadn't even consciously prayed. But one day, going about her routine, she heard a voice—not audible, but unmistakable nevertheless. It called her by name. "Have I not cared for you all these years? And I will be with you." Suddenly—even though nothing

had changed--everything changed. She says, "I felt utterly light; I was encompassed in peace. I knew everything would be all right." Which isn't to say she avoided all suffering. But her desperation was transformed into hope as she looked at her situation with new eyes. Now she could face the sorrow and difficulty and confusion with confidence that she was not alone. *I have seen the Lord.*

He must rise from the dead if his going to save us from it. He had to rise from the dead if God's truth is to be vindicated: that love is stronger than death; that the light of life shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it. We know too well the power death has to destroy and erode. And we fear it. We do everything we can to outrun its relentless pursuit. And we cannot. Only one who has tasted death and conquered it possesses the power to reconcile a fractured world or liberate a soul imprisoned by fear. Only a risen Lord can transform a grave into a labor and delivery room bearing the beloved into new life.

Jesus' resurrection is the hope of the world. Yes, it's the same old world and we are greeted every day with evidence that evil still holds sway. The power of our enemy death produces fear and despair and cynicism that imagines nothing can change. "It is what it is." But Easter counters such resignation with a thundering "No it isn't." It's something entirely new. He must rise from the dead, and in so doing, shatter the inevitability of the old order, break the back of evil's domination, and inaugurate a new reality of truth and love and life---stronger than the grave-- that will ultimately prevail.

*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*

The world looks different when you see it with Easter eyes. Its violence and heartbreak and hatreds do not have the last word. That very world becomes a proving ground for disciples to turn from weeping and get on with living. Farmer-poet Wendell Berry calls it "practicing resurrection." When you understand that it's a new day, you are freed from the constraints of the old reality, from anxiety about the future and suspicion of the "other," from a transactional world view that insists on a balanced ledger, and especially, from the fear of death. When you know that Jesus Christ is risen today, *you can be joyful even though you have considered all the facts.* Again Berry urges us: *Do things that don't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Love someone*

*who does not deserve it. Ask the questions that have no answers. Laugh. [the italicized phrases are from "Manifesto," a poem by Wendell Berry, slightly revised]* Because Jesus conquered death, we can dream and dare and do. Called out of our graves by a living Lord, we can practice resurrection.

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I still see him quietly ascend the stairs and slip into the columbarium, but now I see him at other times. There he is, walking up the steps of Heights Youth Club, where he tutors kids. He's staying a little longer at coffee hour after worship, meeting new people. He phoned me not long ago to outline some ideas he has for stewardship. I watch him, and the light in his eyes suggests he sees something beyond the brass plaque on the columbarium niche. You know what I think? I think he's seen the Lord, and has some grave doubt now about the finality of death. I think he believes that because Christ lives, so will she, and so will he and everyone. What he once saw as the end, he now understands is just the beginning.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.  
ALLELUIA! AMEN.