

# “Holy Humor”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 1, 2018*

Easter Sunday  
Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 25:6-9  
John 20:1-18

As John’s gospel describes it, the disciples of Jesus stumble in the dark early that third day after Jesus’ crucifixion: running here and there in confusion, unsure of what they see in the pre-dawn light. Were those the grave clothes sitting in the shadows of the tomb? Was that an angel sitting beside them? And that stranger lingering outside – is he the gardener? “Early in the morning, while it was still dark...” we are told. That’s where Easter begins – in the dark.

Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in the cloak of secrecy. There was no sunlight to illuminate it; no human being to witness it. And even now, two thousand years later, no narrative can do it justice; it exceeds all of our attempts to describe it, prove it, or explain it – because it’s a mystery known only to God. Whatever this resurrection is, its truth and fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes. Somehow, on that dark night in an even darker tomb, God worked in secret to bring new life out of death. Somehow, in the darkness, God changed the world so that it would never be the same again.

My one and only acting experience was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. My role was Christian; the other guy, the one who Roxanne falls in love with, but who does not have the words to express it. The ruse is set into motion as Cyrano, the one with the very prominent nose, whispers the proper words for Christian to repeat. At night, though, Cyrano and Roxanne, hidden from one another, are able to converse directly; it is here under the cover of darkness that their hearts are exposed and love made known.

This is only one of many examples from literature, stage or film where, under the cover of darkness or disguise, an identity can be hidden: think of Superman’s glasses that transform him into Clark Kent, Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau, or Robin Williams as the English nanny *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Here, in John’s gospel, it is the risen Jesus who is mistakenly – almost farcically – identified by Mary in that early dawn darkness to be a gardener. It is only when he speaks her name that she recognizes him and believes that he is risen, risen indeed.

Mary Magdalene, that mysterious figure who is so often misidentified as a repentant prostitute – who, even tonight, during the live TV broadcast of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, will likely be portrayed as loving Jesus as little too much in the wrong kind of way – she had been with him all the way. She had witnessed him healing withered bodies and opening blind eyes. She had seen how the crowds adored him and the religious rulers hated him. She had stood under the cross when they crucified him, and her heart was broken. Now that the Sabbath was nearly over, she went to the tomb, with – the other gospels tell us – spices to prepare the body for burial. In her despair, she may have thought, “that’s the least I can do.”<sup>1</sup>

At some point or another, we all learn the lesson that it’s easy to believe in the sunlight, but hard to believe in the darkness. Anyone can walk in the sunshine; but only the faithful can walk in the dark. And yet, for Mary Magdalene, even when it was dark, God was making a way when there was no way. She remained faithful to Jesus while waiting for the light to come.

Fred Craddock says, “Faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated for all with the same kind and degree of evidence.”<sup>2</sup> Three disciples came to the tomb that morning. Peter looked around, he saw what was there, and left. The disciple called the beloved one came in and even though we’re told he did not yet understand, with no other evidence but an empty tomb and folded grave clothes, “he saw and believed.”

Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, represents faith formed in a different way. The empty tomb, rather than even hinting resurrection, saddened Mary with the thought that Jesus’ body must have been stolen. Not even the appearance of angels sitting in the tomb were enough to phase her. She turns around and sees Jesus but assumes he is the gardener. Whether it’s the darkness or her disappointment, for whatever reason, she does not recognize him.

“Woman,” he addresses her. But, then, he goes on to receive her as a person, someone he knows and loves, calling her by name, “Mary.” That personal address makes all the difference; known, she knows; seen, she can see; loved, she loves...and then goes and tells the others all that she has seen, known, and loved.

We live in a time when, increasingly it seems, we seek to be *recognized* – to be noticed and acknowledged; friended and reposted and liked – whether or not we are truly *known*. We live in a time when our primary claim to recognition is our differences; defining ourselves not by what binds us together but rather what separates us. In a world

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<sup>1</sup> William Self, “While It Was Still Dark” from *Day1.org*

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*.

full of endless channels and platforms, with a horde of voices clamoring for recognition, the most distinctive voice is the one most likely to gain attention.

The price we might pay for this is falling prey to the temptation to define ourselves *over and against* each other, rather than *in relation to* and *in communion with* each other. You know how it goes: I'm male, you're female. She's rich, he's poor. Over here are liberals, over there conservatives. He's straight, she's gay. I'm American-born, you're an immigrant. And so on, until all you have is a collection of individual, distinct persons each clamoring for attention and recognition based on what makes us different, with little sense of what we share in common.

Affirmation and recognition can be good and desirable; but affirmation is not acceptance, and being recognized pales in comparison to being known. As Mary discovered when Jesus said her name, in Easter's dawn light, we can hope for more than recognition – some brief moment in the sun – and instead accept the invitation to be truly known; that is, to be seen and accepted as we are, which in turn frees us to know and accept others as they are.<sup>3</sup>

Today, as I'm sure you know, is not just Easter Sunday, but also April Fool's Day – the first time in over sixty years that both have fallen on the same date. This is the day we proclaim an empty tomb with the stone rolled away; we talk about angels appearing and the risen Lord walking through a garden. John could have written a less complicated story; one that may, for some, be easier to believe; he could have left out the holy humor of mistaken identity. Some of us accept in faith each and every word that is written; others of us believe because of some time when we've heard our name spoken and felt fully known; while some of us remain skeptical even today, wondering if we are being asked to play the fool to believe a story like this.

John's gospel makes room for each of us. While Peter and the beloved disciple leave after they see the empty tomb, Mary remains in the darkness, bewildered and bereft. As Nadia Bolz Weber puts it, she “remains present to what is real, what is actually happening;”<sup>4</sup> doing so even when what was real felt unbearably miserable. And yet, in her sadness, God was with her; Jesus came to her, even before she recognizes him.

This Easter, may the Christ who rose in the darkness lead us into new life, to new light, and new hope. May we know him even in the dark and shadowy and difficult places. May we dare to linger at the graveside until he calls our name, assuring us that we are not just recognized, but truly known. And may we always faithfully share the good news of God's greatest mystery. Christ is risen, risen indeed. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> David Lose, “Truly Known”

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Debi Thomas, “It Happens in the Dark”

