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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
April 8, 2012, Easter Sunday
“Whom Are You Looking For?”
John 20:1-18

Finally, Easter is here! The day that marks what we believe and what we profess to all the world: The one who was dead is now alive. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. We say the words and we mean them. We have lights and flowers and brass and timpani and singing choirs and preaching preachers to prove it! But what happens when someone hears our words and smiles, and with a quizzical look on his or her face quietly asks us to say more about Easter? Undaunted, we quote the Apostles' Creed and say “We believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, died and buried, and on the third day he rose again from the dead.” Our listener still smiles and with a cock of the head says, “Really? A dead person became alive? How?” It's then that our minds start racing and we wish we knew the bible better or wish we'd read more books on this subject or wish someone else was with us to help answer these questions.

Take heart, because at that precise moment, we stand beside Mary Magdalene, who, when she first told the other disciples that Jesus was risen from the grave, was told what she said was nonsense (Luke 24:11). We stand right beside Peter, who on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were swept out into the streets of Jerusalem with the good news of Christ's resurrection, everyone's first reaction was to think they were drunk with new wine (Acts 2:13). We stand beside Paul, whose preaching of the crucified and risen Christ was called pointblank a stumbling block and utter foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23). Yet still our questioner stands before us, waiting, patient, perhaps with a bit of smugness or a patronizing tone as the question is asked again: “How did this dead person come alive again? Tell me.”

To start with: Easter involves a different way of seeing the world. For example, Mary Magdalene made a shift from seeing a gardener to seeing Jesus. She used the same pair of eyes, but she had two totally different perspectives on the world around her: One where death has the final word, and one where it doesn't. And that change came to her on Easter long ago. Next: The bible never tells us how the resurrection of Christ occurred, as if some scientific description of chemistry or physiology could explain what happened to Jesus' body there in the tomb. “How” questions are often petulant questions: little boys with furrowed brows and their arms crossed on their chests, stamping their feet, demanding answers in terms they alone choose to define. It is Doubting Thomas, raising his voice at the other disciples and saying, “Unless I see the mark of the nails and put my finger on the wound in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). As Christians, we can never fully answer “how” questions, because “how” questions rest on a foundation of rationalism and scientific knowledge coming through sensory information, while we stand on a different foundation—a



deeper and, I would argue, complementary foundation—of spirit and beauty and faith. And that foundation leads to a different way of seeing the world.

How do we get to this foundation of faith, this Easter way of seeing things? One way is through having a sense of wonder about the world in which we live. There is far more going on around us than science can ever fully explain. Or as it says in my favorite line from Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I truly believe there are multiple ways of seeing the world around us, scientific, aesthetic, factual, spiritual, reason, faith; ways that are complementary if we open ourselves to that possibility. Here’s an example from the life of a brilliant German mathematician named Carl Friedrich Gauss. Gauss was born in 1777 to a simple brick mason father and a semi-literate mother, who insisted her son get a school education. His genius became evident when he was very young. When Gauss was only 10 years old, a mean schoolmaster one day out of spite gave his pupils the task of adding up all the numbers from 1 to 100. Using chalk on their little slate tablets, they had to total up $1 + 2 + 3 + 4$, adding, erasing, toiling away until they finally added up to 100. But almost as soon as the teacher announced the assignment, Gauss wrote the answer and placed his slate on the teacher’s desk. The teacher thought the boy was a lazy smart-aleck, but only after an hour or so, when all the other slates were turned in, did the teacher find Gauss’ slate, the only one with the correct answer of 5,050. Gauss had seen in a flash that adding pairs of numbers from opposite ends of the list always gave the same sum: $1 + 100 = 101$; $2 + 99 = 101$, all the way down to $50 + 51$. So all Gauss had to do was take 101×50 and he had his answer: 5,050.¹

Out of that entire classroom, the students and their teacher, Gauss alone saw things differently. He saw a deeper pattern, a deeper relationship between the numbers that the others had missed, although it was always there right before their eyes. I think this is analogous to the ways of faith. We can look at life in a linear fashion, a mathematical and rational fashion, in which $1 + 2 + 3 + 4$ on up to 100 eventually gets us to 5,050. Or we can see it differently, more deeply, humbly, faithfully; seeing patterns that exist that we’d never seen before, seeing with new eyes and fresh wonder all that God has made.

How else can we gain faithful sight? By asking ourselves the same questions that were asked of Mary Magdalene: Whom are you looking for? What are you looking for in your life? What is your deepest desire and hope this Easter day? 1) Are you looking for comfort in life as you confront the stark reality of death? Sigmund Freud would see that psychologically as a question in which faith offers its illusion of resurrection to calm our worried spirits, but I think there is another way of seeing things here. 2) Are you looking for security in a violent and uncertain world? Karl Marx would see that sociologically as a question in which religion is only an opiate used to deaden our minds lest we overthrow the powers of oppression around us, but I think there is another way of seeing things here.



3) Are you looking for the meaning in world history, given the short span of any one human life? Charles Darwin would see that biologically as a question answered by evolution and our genetic drive for the survival of the fittest, but I think there is another way of seeing things here.

If you believe in a loving God and Creator, wouldn't it seem logical that God, by definition, wants to help us answer the deep, spiritual questions we carry within us? Wouldn't the God of life provide the answer for what matters most in life?

Remember the two questions asked of Mary Magdalene: Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Our deepest needs must have an answer, something more than Freud, Marx, or Darwin, with all their learning, can provide. And the answer is found, not by asking "How?" or "What?", but by asking "Who": Whom are you looking for? Deep personal questions can only be answered personally. Weeping eyes never look for a scientific answer, a formula, equation or fact; they look for a face, a personal connection. Or, as in this case, a resurrection personal connection. Mary saw things differently once Jesus said her name. And her response was not just "Rabbouni," "Teacher," but rather "My Teacher." The good news Jesus shared with her then was that he was the answer to our deepest longing, the healer of our deepest brokenness, the living connection between this world and the fullness of God's love. For as Jesus put it, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father; my God and your God." The deepest questions of life find their answer in a God who knows us, a Savior who is alive and calls us by name, and a living Spirit that breathes into us, inspires us, and sets us free.

Easter is here! The one who was dead is now alive. Jesus Christ was crucified, died and buried, and on the third day he rose again from the dead. We say all the right words, yet still someone smiles and with a cock of the head says, "Really? A dead person became alive? How?" I don't know. That's a tomb question about things that happened in the dark before the stone was rolled away. To pursue that question is to choose darkness on Easter day. But by standing just a little ways away, outside in the light next to Mary Magdalene, we hear different questions: *Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?* For these questions, our heart and our soul take the lead in answering. Our eyes raise up, trusting in a God who provides both the yearning and the yearning's answer. Our ears hear our name called. We see a meal, an empty cross, a community. We feel a strong passion for justice, for mercy, for second chances in a fragile-yet-beautiful world. Our brains do eventually catch up in this process, but our eyes now see things differently. And with Mary, Peter, Thomas, Paul, and people like us down through the ages, we too say "Rabbouni, my Lord and my God."

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

¹ Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, p. 106.

