

April 1, 2018 – Easter Sunday Journey Worship

TEXT: John 20:1–18

THEME: Reclaiming Our Spirit

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Apparently “fake news” has a history long before the presidential election of 2016. On April 1, 1957, the BBC “reported that Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees.”¹ And on April 1, 1985, *Sports Illustrated* published some fake news about rookie pitcher Sidd Finch, reporting that he could throw a fastball over 168 mph. News outlets were not alone in launching fake news on this date in history. Apparently on April 1, 1996, fast food chain Taco Bell announced that it was going to purchase the Liberty Bell and rename it the “Taco Liberty Bell.”² Allegedly, folks were duped in every case—forgetting that these reports of fake news were launched on April 1—a date that has been known as “April Fool’s Day” since at least 1700, with traditions of trickery and pranks going back at least another 120 years.

Whether we’re on the lookout for pranksters on April Fool’s Day or reading through our friends’ newsfeeds, we have learned that we need to be “discerning” about what we believe. Did the stranger asking for gas money *really* forget her wallet at home and need to get to the hospital to be with her sick parent—or is she up to something? Is the message on our answering machine *really* from the IRS, or is someone trying to hack into our personal information? Is the new sweater we received for Christmas REALLY flattering, or are they just being polite?

We know that everything we read, hear, and even see isn’t always true. Reports aren’t always accurate. Photos can easily be doctored. And even textbooks reflect the bias of the author.

So how do we know who to trust? How do we know what to believe?

When Mary arrived at Jesus’ tomb early on the first day of the week, she didn’t know what to believe. The heavy stone that had sealed the tomb had been rolled away. She did what most of us would have done too: First, she ran. Second, she found close friends. Third, she came up with a hypothesis—one that made the most sense given the evidence. Surely someone had taken Jesus away—perhaps the high priests not wanting people to worship outside of his tomb, or the soldiers not wanting Jesus’ final resting place to become the location of an insurrection. Maybe his family came and got him—maybe they took him closer to home. Or maybe, simply, grave robbers had stolen her Rabbi.

Something is amiss, so Mary brings Peter and John to see what she has seen so that they can figure out what happened. Upon entering the tomb, they notice that Jesus’

1 <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history-April-1>

2 *ibid*

grave clothes were laying there—not even in disarray, but folded up. The text tells us a strange detail—it says that the disciples believed, and then they went home.

But Mary lingers. She hangs back and lets the weight of the emotion of the last few days wash over her. She weeps for her friend—for his suffering and his death and now his disappearance. It was all too much. In this vulnerable state, two angels appear and tell her that Jesus isn't there because he has risen from the dead. He has not been taken away, but he has risen. He is no longer dead but alive. Although theirs is the news she would most like to hear, she doesn't believe them.

Remember, Mary was among those who stayed. She saw what happened to Jesus. She was there when he was hanging on the cross, when he was tortured, when he uttered his last word and breathed his last breath. She saw it all unfold before her very eyes. He was dead. She knew it. Anything else was a lie.

But then another figure appears and asks her again why she is crying. He doesn't offer explanations, though—even though she asks. He simply says her name. And as the Good Shepherd's voice is recognized when he calls his sheep by name, Mary knows this gardener is her Lord.

And so Mary becomes the first in a long line of people who spread the unbelievable good news about the risen Christ. She first tells the disciples who don't seem to know what to think until they too encounter Jesus as he walks through walls and visits them in the upper room and breaks bread and invites them to touch his side. There are more eyewitness accounts—more unbelievable reports stacked right up on top of one another, more and more people who see and hear and believe.

But Mary is first. In every gospel this is the case. One commentator points out that in John's gospel, Mary's encounter with Jesus is “visceral, emotional, and deeply, deeply personal. As such, it presses us to consider ways in which our faith in Easter's Jesus—even if we never actually observe a dead man rise—must be as real and physically grounded as that garden scene was for Mary.”³

How does Mary know what to believe? She encounters the Risen Christ. She hears him call her name. She experiences his presence with her senses. She allows him to touch her heart. This commentator reminds us:

As he did with Mary, Jesus comes to us not as a general idea or an imagined ghostly figure, but as a presence that reaches beyond our mind's overt powers of knowing and touches our lives in ways we cannot see. They are felt—tasted, touched, smelled, heard, seen in image, and as such, often as unconscious as

they are visceral. God is known in the muscle memory of our tissue, in the turn of lip in that garden smile, in the slang-tinged voice of a trusted friend, in the fall of the foot's arch in wet grass at sunrise. God's coming also unfolds in the world of our emotions and deepest dispositions—a mark of God's presence that can sense that the world suddenly shifts into place and has meaning.⁴

We encounter the risen Christ in moments of forgiveness, in the dawn of new life, in restored relationship, in opportunities that bring us hope, in cries for justice and steps toward wholeness.

As a people of faith we trust the reports of eyewitnesses from years ago, from Mary's first words to the Word in our Scripture testifying that Christ is risen indeed! And into this larger story we weave in our stories, the testimonies of our heart that the risen Christ calls to *us* too—in unbelievable ways often through a still, small voice.

Christ is risen! This message is more than news. It is game changing reality. It is a paradigm shift that opens the world to us in a new way. Everything that has seemed broken, everything that has seemed tainted, everything that has seemed lost is now infused with healing, with repair and with hope. God's grace has broken into creation with game-changing redemption won for us in Christ, and God's grace has broken in to our very lives to heal our most wounded places and restore hope where there is deep despair.

Hear the unbelievable good news: Christ is alive and with us still! It might be hard to recognize Jesus. **He often looks different than we expect—showing up in the stranger we meet or the neighbor we can't stand.** Matthew even reminds us that Jesus often shows up in the faces of the sick or the oppressed, those looked down upon by society or those who have been forgotten. ***Sometimes he's hard to see.*** And although we hope to encounter him in church, remember that Christ isn't always where we expect to find him **The living Christ is on the move: he can be found on the roads we travel, in our locked rooms, in the bread we break together.**

These events don't fit tidily into any category—just like that first Easter morn. They defy logic. They are, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, *unnatural*. She writes: “Death is natural. Loss is natural. Grief is natural. But those stones have been rolled away this happy morning, to reveal the highly unnatural truth. By the light of this day, God has planted a seed of life in us that cannot be killed, and if we can remember that then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.”⁵

May this Easter good news give us something to talk about, something to embrace, something in which we can place our hope, something to believe in.

4 *ibid*

5 Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Unnatural Truth” *Home By Another Way*. P 111-112.