

April 4, 2021 | Easter Sunday Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [John 20:1–18](#)

TITLE: **It's God's City Now**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

On Easter, it's more important to remember the faithful good news Mary Magdalene proclaimed rather than remember the worried questions she asked.

You know the story. Early on Easter morning, Mary made her way to the tomb where Jesus had been laid only to discover to her horror that the grave had been disturbed and his body was missing. Rushing back to find Simon Peter, she named her worried question for the first time: *The Lord has been taken from the tomb and we don't know where they've laid him.* Peter and another disciple go to the cemetery, find the tomb empty and return home while Mary stayed behind distraught in the cemetery. Angels ask about her tears and for a second time she names her fear: *My Lord has been taken from the tomb and I don't know where they've laid him.* The risen Christ appears yet is not recognized by Mary, and to him she says a version of what she's already said twice before: *If you've taken him away, tell me where you've laid him.* At last comes the joyous finale: Jesus calls Mary by name; she recognizes him at last, and runs back to the disciples with her first original words spoken that Easter morning: "I have seen the Lord."

A missing body is now a living body—Christ is risen! This is understandably the main focus of Easter, this resurrection from the dead. Jesus Christ was no longer in a borrowed tomb but was seen by Mary Magdalene in the cemetery. He later appeared to the disciples behind locked doors in the Upper Room. He walked on the road to Emmaus and joined two disciples for dinner. He also called out to disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee and fixed them a breakfast on the shore. Christ even met with the disciples on a high hill in Galilee and spoke to them before ascending into heaven. Those are the Easter resurrection stories we tell—stories about the one who was dead but now is alive.

But I don't want us to overlook an important part of the Easter good news. As miraculous as it is that Christ is alive, it is even more consequential to realize that he is alive everywhere, that he now moves beyond the usual limits of space and time as we experience life. The Jesus of ancient Galilee has now become Christ, the Savior of the world. The message of Easter is not about resuscitation, a resurrection of one body; it's about a new reality, a new state of being that has been revealed to the world and which includes us. That's the Easter good news!

To get this idea across to you, I'm going to need some help from a contemporary humorist named Fran Lebowitz. Lebowitz is a 70 year old public speaker who is known for her somewhat crotchety, opinionated writings about life in America today—a typical New Yorker. A year or two ago, she was asked about life in the big city and Lebowitz immediately began to complain that so many people today don't know how to walk on the sidewalk anymore. As she put it, New York City has millions of people and everyone

used to know that if you're walking toward other people, you move a little bit, they move a little bit and that's how everyone's still alive at the end of the day. Now, she says, people don't do that. They don't watch where they're walking because they're on their phones or because they live in a world of one. Sometimes she saw someone not paying attention and thought, "I'm gonna let them just walk right into me." And they do and look up annoyed, and she'd say "Hmm, imagine that. Other people on the sidewalk. Isn't that astonishing?" Lebowitz decided she should write a manifesto to advise all these inattentive people, the title of which would be "Pretend It's a City." I like that. It's a bit snarky and has an urban attitude to it, but there's truth in that title. Pretend it's a city where there are other people and we all have to go places. Everyone would get through the day better if we all just did that.

So what does the Gospel of Lebowitz have to do with the Gospel of John today? Easter is not just about what happened to Jesus' body. Resurrection is not about resuscitation. Yes, Jesus is alive and he's no longer in the tomb. But that means he's out and about. He's on the loose. He is frankly anywhere and everywhere. Look up from your phones. Break out of your self-absorbed world of one. The Christian manifesto proclaims, "Wherever you are, believe it's Christ's city. Believe it's God's city. Believe it's God's world." In the words of Paul Tillich, it's a new creation, a New Being, a new state of things. So accept it, enter into it, find yourself in this new Easter world and come alive. It's God's city now.

Another wise theologian, Karl Barth, put it this way: *Easter is the breaking in of a new world through the existence of the man Jesus, the bearer of victory over death and the destroyer of the burden of human sin. The Christian community saw not only a supernatural continuation of his previous life, but an entirely new life of the exalted Jesus Christ that was simultaneously the beginning of a new world once and for all.* (Dogmatics in Outline) We've always known this is God's world. But honestly we tend to take this fact for granted. We think our name is on the planet's deed of ownership. But Easter snaps us out of this delusion. The tomb is empty. Christ is on the loose. Something miraculous has been revealed and we're not in charge. It's Christ's world—it's God's city now.

That's why it was wonderful to hear from Hunter, Bala and Chenoa this morning—to see images from South America and India and remember that we're not the only ones doing church on Easter Sunday. They've already had sunrise services in New Zealand and Taizé, France. They've already shouted "Alleluia" at Balaka CCAP church in Malawi and St. Peter's cathedral in Rome. The risen Christ of Easter isn't limited to here in Pittsburgh. This gives us hope as we shout our "Alleluias", as we work for justice, as we pray for peace.

For the one who said from the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing" must also be there amid the violence in Myanmar and Palestine, there amid the flower memorials set up after senseless gun violence in Atlanta, Colorado and California, there with the grieving family of the courageous Capital police officer in Washington. The one whom no grave could contain must also be there now on our

borders as families seek asylum, as children sleep on flimsy mats, as huddled masses yearn to be free and await our answer to their request for hospitality. The one whom called Mary by name has to be there in Minneapolis as crowds insist on remembering George Floyd's name and call for racial justice to be honored in this country. The one whose appearance lifted the weary hearts of disciples trudging to Emmaus has to be there in hospitals still full with Covid patients and nursing homes with elderly residents still isolated from their loved ones.

Christ is no longer bound to one place and time. Last year for Easter, we were still in shock as the pandemic's powerful force rolled over us. We gathered remotely that Sunday, but we were like Mary standing dazed and confused at the tomb, mostly asking questions even as we heard again the old, old story. This year, we gather again remotely. We've endured a hard year full of disruptions and losses and major stress. But my prayer is that the Easter resurrection stories will reach you right where you are. We who have lived in quarantine isolation: what better news is there than knowing Christ appears beside those he loves even behind locked doors? We who have trudged down lonely roads, grieving or tired or away from our family: what better news is there than believing Christ literally walks beside us every step of the way? We who have struggled to go back to work, whether that involved fishing on the sea like Simon Peter long ago, or logging onto remote work computers, school classes done on Zoom formats, or bundling up in PPE for another shift in the nursing home: what better news is there than having the resurrected Christ call out to us, inviting us to join him for a meal, reminding us that he is right there beside us?

After Mary Magdalene three times asked her questions about where Jesus' body had gone, she finally said something original—something faithful and joyful: *I have seen the Lord!* Everything else became secondary at that point. No more questions. No more replaying the images of his death on the cross and hurried burial in the tomb. Right there Mary encountered the risen Christ. She could breathe again—she could trust and hope again. She became the first Easter preacher of good news, telling the world “I have seen the Lord!”

Look around and open your eyes of faith. The risen Christ is near! In every situation you can imagine, in every place and time—especially where there is trouble, grief, sin and fear, Christ is present. Lift up your downcast eyes. Quit being distracted by your devices. It's Christ's world now. It's God's city now. It's Easter—Christ is risen! We have seen the Lord!

AMEN