

## April 17, 2022 (Easter Sunday) | Sanctuary Worship Service

Text: [Luke 24:1–12](#)

### TITLE: Tales of Wonder and Amazement

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The New York Times book review recently interviewed the African American literary critic Margo Jefferson. They began by asking her “What books are on your night stand?” She listed off several titles and then said, “*I choose which to read by asking myself, ‘Can you risk having this in your dreams?’*” You know that feeling—you’re lying in bed, moving towards sleep while your mind continues to process images you most recently saw or imagined. You replay a conversation from earlier in the day, a film or TV show you watched, an article you read, or something from a final scroll on your Smartphone before you switched off the light. That’s where Margo Jefferson’s thoughtful question rings true. Sometimes the days’ activities or our bedtime reading prompts the question: *Can I risk having this in my dreams tonight?* But sometimes events overwhelm us and we have no choice about the questions that flood our minds as we roll over in bed and try to get some sleep.

At some point on the evening of that first Easter, Mary Magdalene tried to close her eyes to go to sleep. But I imagine her mind was still wide awake, trying to process what she’d seen early that morning. She had not gone to the cemetery with the expectation of seeing an empty tomb. Her devotion to Jesus compelled her to complete the burial rituals left incomplete when the sun set on Friday. But now she couldn’t “unsee” what her eyes had seen: the stone rolled away, no body on the rock slab inside, burial cloths left in a pile, two angels asking why they’re looking for the living in a place of the dead.

Perhaps most troubling of all was not the sight of the empty tomb. Most unsettling, most remarkable, was the fact that God had placed the responsibility of telling others about this empty tomb squarely on her shoulders. It’s not like God didn’t have an entire arsenal of natural wonders at God’s disposal that could have been deployed to announce Jesus’ resurrection. Goodness knows, Noah had his giant rainbow, Moses had his parted sea, Jonah had his whale, Balaam had his talking ass, and Joshua made the sun stand still until the end of the battle of Gibeon. Surely there had to be options for heavenly pyrotechnics available to announce to the world that Jesus Christ was alive?! But no, according to Luke, the entire responsibility for telling the resurrection story was assigned to a group of women, struck by wonder by what they’d seen, and the apostle Peter, who was filled with amazement after visiting the empty tomb for himself.

To be honest, the first time Mary tried to tell what she’d seen, her friends didn’t believe her. I don’t know if they laughed or stared or shook their heads in disbelief or all of the above. But scripture says point blank that her words seemed like an idle tale and she was not believed. Quite an inauspicious start to a new chapter in the history of the world. Even when Peter ran to the tomb, scripture doesn’t say that he came to believe the women’s story of resurrection; it only says he was filled with amazement. Well, amazement is not faith. Yet somehow this was God’s plan for sharing the biggest news of all time.

So put yourself in Mary Magdalene's sandals for a moment. Imagine that you were the first witness to the empty tomb—that to you has been entrusted the task of sharing this tale of wonder and amazement—that God's whole plan is dependent on you (which it actually is, but I'm getting ahead of myself). How do you make sense of this, as you lie in your bed knowing sleep is impossible until you sort this Easter-stuff out? I suggest to you that this requires three things: a bit of philosophy, a bit of poetry, and Clark Kent's glasses. Let me explain.

Philosophers spend their time pondering the big questions of life and Jesus' resurrection from the dead is one of the all-time big questions. It is a question that is unanswerable because it has no parallels. It cannot be absolutely proven; it is designed to be accepted by faith. A wise 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher named Hannah Arendt insisted that we need unanswerable questions. She said that if we ever lose our ability to ask unanswerable questions, we will also lose the ability to ask answerable questions – the types of questions upon which every civilization depends.<sup>2</sup> Mary Magdalene, Peter and the others were confronted with an unanswerable question that now affected every other question, every other topic of conversation they would have from that day forth. Because of that one big question—that tale of resurrection wonder—everything else about life was seen in a brand new light. It was true for them; it is still true for us.

Those last sentences likely sounded a bit poetic, which is also totally appropriate on Easter. If philosophers want us to think deeper, poets want us to look deeper. Poets want us to be moved by the sheer wonder and mystery of life. There's a very wise Jewish writer and poet named Abraham Heschel. Heschel wants us to be daily filled with awe—this sense that something bigger than us is at work in this world; that there is a transcendence, a holy mystery, active all around us. A rational scientist cannot get you to believe in resurrection, but a poet can. A poet gently places the Easter story in our outstretched hands and tells us to hold it lovingly for it is more than history and reason. It is a sacred memory and a glimpse into the mind of God. It unlocks much of what life is truly about, and in unlocking that mystery, it sets us free.

Which now leads me to Clark Kent's glasses. If you're a fan of Marvel and DC comics and movies, you know that there are literally scores of superheroes in these fantasy worlds. But one of the oldest superheroes is Superman—faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound—that guy. Now perhaps the most amazing part of Superman is that he doesn't hide his true identity behind a mask, like Batman, Spiderman or Wolverine. Nope, he simply puts on a pair of regular ol' black frame glasses and he becomes Clark Kent, a non-descript newspaper reporter. Such a simple thing, yet it makes all the difference in the world. Put on glasses—Clark Kent; take them off—Superman, with whom all things are possible.

The Christian writer John Pavlovitz used this analogy of Clark Kent's glasses to remind us that what separates us from the life we have and the life we could have is often a line so narrow that we'd be shocked if we realized it. As he put it, most of us are only one decision away from completely rewriting our personal narrative—one conversation, one

relationship, one moment of fresh clarity—and suddenly a whole new life opens up before us.<sup>3</sup> The line that Mary Magdalene stepped over on Easter morning was quite narrow. On one side was a cemetery and burial spices; on the other side was the open doorway to an empty tomb. Peter stepped over the line as well. On one side was a scared disciple, unsure what to do next, and on the other was a man running back to his friends in the Upper Room filled with amazement. Glasses on, glasses off. As simple as that.

Philosophy questions, poetic wonder, plus small steps that change our lives forever. All of that is a part of what it means to be people of Easter faith. For in so many ways it boils down to what the angels said to the women: *Remember what Jesus told you—and stop looking for the living among the dead!* Stop looking for life among deadly bigotries and close-minded prejudices, among soul-crushing cynicism and fear. Stop looking for life among policies of war, capital punishment, and oppression; among laws taking away voting rights, punishing transgender athletes and families, insisting women have no say about the care of their own bodies. Stop for a moment and ask yourself the question “Does this choice, this law, this action of mine bring life or death? Is this another sad stroll in the cemetery or part of a joyful dash down the road of resurrection?”

Which brings us full circle back to you and me, to Mary Magdalene and Peter and why God incredibly put the full weight of telling the Easter story on our shoulders. The resurrection of Christ was never meant to overwhelm, to make us less than human by heavenly pyrotechnics forcing us to believe Easter is all true. The resurrection of Christ was meant to make us more than we ever imagined possible, to energize us to ponder the unanswerable so we will approximate what can be answered; to inspire us to see glimpses of the holy in the mundane moments of our daily lives; and to step over that thin line—from Clark Kent to Superman, from cowering disciple to gospel proclaimer, no longer looking for anything in the places of death but rather rejoicing always in the ways of resurrection life. God knows we are up for this task, which is why we’ve been chosen to tell this tale of wonder and amazement for a hurting world longing for its message of hope.

So what’s on your nightstand? What stories will you risk having in your dreams tonight and in your heart tomorrow? The story of Christ’s resurrection is worth a lifetime’s pondering and a lifetime’s proclamation. Such is our calling from God. Therefore hear again the Easter good news of Jesus Christ: *Tomb thou shalt not hold him longer; death is strong, but life is stronger. Stronger than the dark, the light; stronger than the wrong, the right. Faith and hope triumphant say “Christ arose on Easter Day.”* (Philip Brooks)

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Margo Jefferson, *New York Times Book Review*, *By the Book*, April 10, 2022, 6.

<sup>2</sup> “The Philosopher in Dark Times,” George Prochnik, *New York Times Book Review*, April 15, 2018, 9.

<sup>3</sup> John Pavlovitz, *Hope and Other Superpowers*, 2018, p. 19.