



# *The Westminster Pulpit*

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## ***“When is Easter?”*** **Sermon on John 20:1-18**

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Resurrection of the Lord / Easter Sunday

Easter is a surprise, so here's a surprise for you bulletin followers. I'm not reading from Luke. I'm reading from John. Surprise. And the sermon title: "When is Easter?"

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

When is Easter? I know that's a silly question to ask on Easter. I suppose Easter is the moment when Jesus is raised from the dead. Death has been defeated, the ages have shifted, and love wins! There in the tomb, the resurrection happens when Jesus opens his eyes and breathes his first breath. It's Easter! But nobody knows it's Easter except Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. They're celebrating. It's Easter, but it's not Easter, because it takes a while for Easter to dawn on people.

Early morning, Mary is in the dark and sees the stone rolled away, she doesn't think of Easter. She thinks, "They have taken away the Lord, and we don't know where they have laid him." No trumpets of joy, the sound is of a bad, sad day in a string of bad, sad days.

One day, "THEY arrested my Lord." One day, "THEY crucified my Lord." One day, "THEY have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where THEY laid him?" It's Easter, and none of that sounds like Easter. If there's someone to blame, THEY are IT!

Just the other day, my colleague, Ashley, who ministers to young families, wrote an email to her male colleagues here about teaching dates for the Young Men's Bible Study. Every other Sunday night. She had a list of dates for spring. She was making sure we were all available for the dates we had offered.

Guy was the first to reply. He emailed back, "May 24th is Memorial Day weekend, do you think anyone will be around?" I joined the chain, "I'll be around on Memorial Day weekend. But, you have me down teaching on Mother's Day. Are young dads allowed to get out of the house on Mother's Day?" A few minutes later, Ashley responded to us all with two words, "I quit."

Now, I like Ashley and don't want her to quit. I decided to go to her office and speak to her very pastorally. When I say pastorally, I don't mean pastorally; I mean I spoke to her as a pastor who is now jaundiced by the realities of being a pastor.

"Look," I said, "When you get as old as I am, you realize not to expect too much from the church. Here's what you can expect: You get the church for the last two weeks in August, and then they're off for Labor Day Weekend. Then you get three weeks of the church, and then it's Fall break, and in West Nashville, Fall break lasts for three weeks. After Fall break, you get a handful of Sundays to Thanksgiving. And then, while people do show up for worship after Thanksgiving, don't expect anything more because, 'It's the busy season.'"

"Then you have January. And you might as well take a weekend out for a snowstorm or ice storm. Better yet, take two weekends, maybe three weekends. And then it's Spring break for three weeks. And then comes Palm Sunday. Now they all show up for Easter. But they don't show up the next Sunday because they were here the Sunday before! Then it's May. And they're all here, but 'it's the busy season!' Crazy than December. It's Senior Sunday, Mother's Day, Memorial Day. Packing it all in. And then you don't see them again until August. Get used to it Ashley. 'They have taken away my Lord.' They! 'And I do not know where they have laid him.' The school systems, sports, trips and dances. 'HE'S GONE!'"

I probably shouldn't have let you in on that pastoral conversation. I mean, if you have a heart, you probably feel guilty now. Good! It's about time! I'm sorry, my retirement is getting ahead of me.

But I blame! We blame!

Turn on the TV or watch some feed, and there's someone all sad and mad, "They have taken away the Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." "We've got to take back this country for Jesus." "We've got to put Jesus back into our SCHOOLS, because they've taken him out." There's "A WAR ON CHRISTMAS." We have to fight!"

But that's not Easter. Easter isn't a day when you blame others for stealing your savior. Easter isn't a day of a small Jesus that you have to protect and prop up. That's not Easter; that's just small.

"They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." Peter and an unnamed disciple heard Mary's cry. Now, I know there are some scholars who think the "unnamed disciple" is the Gospel writer John. But I like to think that anytime a character goes unnamed, the author is inviting us to put our name in. Be the name. "We are to race with Peter to the tomb to the scene of the crime! The place where the Lord was stolen."

You see! It's not Easter. Not even when Peter goes into the tomb. He sees a lot of evidence and artifacts. Linen cloths and head wrappings. And then the unnamed disciple goes in and believes. Believes what? Believes Easter? I don't know because of the way John's Gospel says it. Listen again to what John writes:

"Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes."

That doesn't sound like Easter to me.

What are you believing if you don't understand that he must rise from the dead? Do you believe they've taken away the Lord? Maybe. Do you believe in the darkness of the world? Maybe. Or could it be that you believe that when you love someone, just as I have loved you – you must love someone, life ends and begins in a tomb?

In John's Gospel, you have to believe in the tomb. The tomb is where Lazarus was buried. His sister said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said, "Where have you laid him?" "Come and see." Jesus wept. "Why?" Because after he calls to Lazarus to "COME OUT!," the tomb is empty for him to enter!

Easter arrives after the sacrifice of love. Do you believe that? We are commanded to believe that! "Love one another just as I have loved you, you also must love another." You give your whole life.

When is Easter? When you love the world so much that you'd give your life for the whole world and trust that God will resurrect.

When is Easter? Maybe you're like Mary and are just absolutely inconsolable. Maybe everything has gone wrong for you. Maybe God can't be found. They've taken him away! And if that's you, I pray that you hear your name called out by the risen Lord. I pray that.

Maybe you're like Peter, all in until you weren't. "I'm not going to deny you." But then, "I don't know him." "Don't know who you're talking about." "Never met him!" Three times he denied him. When is Easter for Peter? I suppose it dawns on him some early morning near still waters.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” “Then feed my sheep.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “You know I do, Lord.” “Then tend my sheep.”

He said to him a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt. “You know everything, you know that I love you, Lord.” “Feed my sheep. I need you... I need you to live my life... love one another just as I have loved you; you also must love one another.” Peter, it will take you places you don’t want to go... a cross, a tomb... but wow, what a life!

When is Easter? No doubt about it, it’s when Jesus took that first breath, when God raised Jesus from the dead! The ages shifted! Grace abounds. Love conquers all. The trouble is, there are characters who don’t know it’s Easter.

I’m speaking pastorally now. You’ve got to show up. You have to go forth and love one another. You’ve got to love one another just as I have loved you. You’ve got to give it all. It’s what being a Christian is all about, despite what you might hear out there. Love is what it’s all about. One commandment. And when you go to the tomb, God will do the rest.

That unnamed disciple had the last word in John’s Gospel. He writes:

“If I told you all the things the risen Lord did, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

What that means is that you – the unnamed disciple - have a story to tell. And I’m speaking pastorally now. The greatest gift of my ministry has been seeing disciples – who have names like yours – do amazing works of love. No more “THEY”... only the power of resurrection love. Hallelujah! It’s Easter.

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