

# Love Sweeps Us Up

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Easter

April 20-21, 2019

John 20:1-18

Many years ago, when my father retired, he took Master Gardener classes at the University of Illinois. He really enjoyed the newfound knowledge and became crazy about flowers with lots of colors! Whenever we would come to visit in the summertime, as soon as we arrived, he would say, "Come and see the garden!" Part of being a Master Gardener is taking classes and learning and then volunteering at the local office by taking calls and helping other people with their garden. He enjoyed sharing advice. Helping other gardens flourish.

One of my Dad's favorites was a rain lily. Every year he would divide them up and share them. He gave a lot away! I have my own rain lily. Every fall it migrates to the furnace room where it hibernates all winter.

It doesn't look like much right now, but once the frost is past, I will place it back outside and give it a lot of water. And soon little lovely leaves will sprout up and after that, pretty pink petals will appear! Over the years I have divided this plant up, too, and given a lot away. Even though I am not a Master Gardener, I did learn a thing or two!

Spring is upon us. Trees, bushes, and bulbs are popping out and opening up. Soon there will be color around us. Last weekend, tulips stood tall under inches of heavy snow. Even though spring snows are not really unusual, they kind of catch us by surprise.

This weekend we celebrate the Festival of the Resurrection. The Day of Easter is upon us.

Like millions and millions of people before us we gather and share the ancient antiphonal Paschal greeting: "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!"

Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised. He is now the Risen Christ!

All of the Gospels tell the story of Easter, even Gospels that didn't make it into the canon! Each of the writers tells the story with their own themes and emphases. Like we all do.

Common to all of the Gospels is the empty tomb and the presence of women—especially present is Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene was a friend and follower of Jesus. Luke says that Jesus cast seven demons from her. Mary's name is mentioned twelve times in the New Testament, more than most of the apostles. Mary Magdalene was present with Jesus' mother and other women at the crucifixion.

In John we read that Mary went alone to the tomb while it was still dark. She was so alarmed by the empty tomb that she went to get Peter. Mary returned and stood weeping in the garden. She couldn't recognize the figure standing in front of her through her tears and imagined him to be the gardener.

Mary asked for a little help: "If you know where he is, please tell me!"

Then, Jesus, who is now the Risen Christ, said her name: "Miriam... Mary."

Mary recognized his voice! And she responded, "Rabbuni!" (Aramaic for "rabbi"). In this recognition, Mary identifies not only Jesus but herself—as a disciple.

Jesus—the Risen Christ—is present in a totally new and universal way. His words, "Do not hold onto me" or "Do not cling to me," are not cold or harsh. Rather, they are saying that something new has happened! Jesus, the individual man of history, has now become the omnipresent Christ. [1]

It seems that we are often like Mary. Sometimes we don't recognize the PRESENCE in our lives.

Tears of sadness can blur our vision. Busyness can blind us and make us feel like we are in a whirlwind. Tragedy and turmoil can leave us looking for what once was.

We need to hear our name pronounced; we need to hear ourselves being called in love before we can see the Christ in our midst.

This past week, the world watched shocked and saddened as the great iconic Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris went up in flames. Even though the old structure has sustained damage over the centuries, this time it was catastrophic. Much was lost.

"Crumbled have spires in ev'ry land..." [2]

The caption in the newspaper, under a photo of the toppling spire, read: "Cathedrals are vulnerable—old dry wood kindles quick burning fires in an empty, cavernous structure."

Built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the cathedral was constructed with heavy stone exterior walls, a wooden roof made of old oak and, below that, a cavernous space full of oxygen that feeds flames. Notre Dame was intentionally designed this way. The roof was built of wood so that it could burn off, but the walls were built of stone that wouldn't burn down. The fire would be contained by the stone exterior and would not put the rest of the city at risk. A professor of art history said this was ingenious.

A big question will be whether it should be rebuilt exactly as before, or will government officials force modern fire regulations onto the iconic building. "It'll be a process watched closely around the world." [3]

Eight-hundred years of PRESENCE is something we Americans cannot easily relate to. Still we sympathize with the French loss. A political cartoon captured shared grief with an image of the Statue of Liberty with a bowed head and tears running down her face.

Cathedrals are vulnerable. And so are we!

We may not be eight-hundred-years old, or made of old wood, but we are vulnerable.

Like Mary, we have demons of our own. Serious obstacles to seeing goodness, participating in life, and being spiritually mature.

Some of us have studied the Enneagram, a tool for self-understanding and spiritual growth. If you haven't studied this yet, I encourage you to! No one is too old to learn and grow! In the Enneagram we identify our way of seeing the world and recognize that we each have our favorite "deadly sin" that block us from God and our selves.

Richard Rohr's definition of sin is helpful: "Sins are fixations that prevent the energy of life, God's love, from flowing freely. They are self-erected blockades that cut us off from God and hence from our authentic potential." [4]

Some of our faves include: resentment, anger, pride, deceit, envy, stinginess, fear, dissatisfaction, a need to dominate, and spiritual laziness. There are more than seven demons! But most of us have one "go to."

I don't follow golf, but I did read about Tiger Woods recent Master's victory. It was quite remarkable for a number of reasons. Tiger Woods was extraordinarily gifted as an athlete. A legend in his sport. He also became legendary in loss ... and frailty. The public saw his life go down in flames, crumble like the spire of Notre Dame, with scandal, divorce, DUI arrest ... struggles with surgeries and dependence on painkillers. He suffered from a great period of self-imposed misfortune.

What surprised me even more than his come back from such colossal collapse was the sympathy and support that surrounded him. Voices cheered him on at the end of the tournament ... "Tiger, Tiger Tiger!" At the eighteenth hole he swept his young son into his arms in the exact place his father swept him up years before. Even the second-place finisher said he was glad Tiger had won.

An editorial about this victory was titled "Tiger Woods and Redemption." Few of us will know such fame, and few of us will fall that far. But, "we all understand mistakes and sins and hardships and hopes, the appeal of glory [another word for PRESENCE] and the need for redemption." [5]

Tiger, the superstar who fizzled out, faced his demons. And as one sportscaster commented, he is older, wiser, healthier, more honest and humble. No matter what, at the end of the game, love was waiting for him!

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr writes that the Easter message for all of us is that “we are all saved in spite of our mistakes and in spite of ourselves. We are all caught up in the cosmic sweep of DIVINE grace and mercy.” [6]

LOVE SWEEPS US UP! I hope you can hear this, trust and remember this!

Easter invites us again into a new kind of PRESENCE. We let go—like Mary did—of a Jesus who is too small, too bound by time and culture. He must surpass the bounds of space, time ethnicity, nation, class, and gender. Easter is so much more than God doing something once and wonderful as a first-century Jewish Rabbi.

Mary Magdalene serves as a witness to personal love and closeness, which is the easiest and best place to start on the path toward a much bigger love.

If God is God, then the Divine Presence must be everywhere and universally accessible. We cannot hold on to it! But we can participate in it!

We can move like Mary to recognize a difference kind of presence. One that we see in ourselves and in each other. The Western Church calls this “incarnation.” The Eastern Church calls this “theosis”—sharing in divine nature.

The image on the screen for today’s sermon is from a fourteenth-century fresco in Istanbul, Turkey. It is an image of the Universal Christ pulling people up and out from hell. Remember the words from the old translation of the creed?



Anastasis fresco-Kariye by Joseph Kranak - Flickr., CC BY 2.0  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25499969>

We participate in the Divine Presence as we help pull each other from hell, as we help each other stay in the land of the living.

This congregation and I have celebrated twenty-three Lent and Easter seasons together. Every year much of our worship is the same. But every Easter is also different. Some of you are new with us. Others have died, moved, or are absent. We have experienced joys and sorrows, changes and challenges of our own. And our life together is changing. Because I am retiring, this is our last Easter day together like this.

Like other Easters, we sing, listen, pray, celebrate, and share a sacred supper. We smell lilies, taste bread, hear music, shake hands, and see each other. This PRESENCE with each other is REAL. In this time and place, we can let go of whatever demons are holding us back, blocking our view. We pull each other up, out of hell's hold, and lift each other to the LIGHT. Because we are the Body of Christ.

One of my most favorite views in this church is from behind the altar. From there I can see all of you, all four sections of the pews, and the choirs ... and the font, the courtyard, the columbarium, and the light streams coming in from the high windows. Season after season, it is glorious. Large and beautiful, encompassing the living and the dead, people and nature, earth and sky.

One of the loveliest Eucharistic prayers is one we pray in the summertime.

Holy Spirit, come upon these gifts and each of us. Strengthen the church universal that it may be a sign of peace and justice in all the world. Restore the earth with your energy for healing and anoint us with the gifts to help make it so.

People, hear the Good News!

**We have been anointed with the gifts to help make it so!**

The Great Master Gardener waters us with welcome and strength, and shines the warm light of truth and hope on our path.

**We are the Body of the Universal Christ.**

Love sweeps us up to be The Sympathy of God and Compassion for the World.

Built on a rock the church shall stand,  
even when steeples are falling;  
crumbled have spires in ev'ry land,  
bells still are chiming and calling. [7]

Happy Easter.  
And Amen.

---

Resources

- [1] Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ*, Convergent Books, 2019, p. 191.
- [2] Lindeman, Ludwig M., "Built on a Rock," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress, 2006, # 652.
- [3] Taylor, Adam and Emily Tamkin. "The Notre Dame Inferno: Cathedrals are vulnerable to burning quickly and take a long time to rebuild," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2019.
- [4] Rohr, Richard, as cited in *The Road Back to You* by Cron and Stabile, IVP Books, 2016, p. 30.
- [5] The Daily Herald Editorial Board. "The Masters redemption of Tiger Woods," *The Daily Herald*, April 16, 2019.
- [6] Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ*, p. 166.
- [7] Lindeman, Ludwig M., "Built on a Rock," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Copyright © 2019, Patricia A. Geiseman

Scripture quotations are from *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### *Reflection Questions:*

- Like Mary (from whom Jesus cast out seven demons), we have demons of our own: envy, pride, stinginess, anger, to name a few. Mary's tears blocked her from seeing Jesus—now the Risen, Universal Christ—in front of her.

What demons do you hold on to? What grief blocks your ability to see the LOVE that is present and open to you?

- This week's sermon image is from a fourteenth-century Eastern church fresco that shows Jesus pulling people from hell!

Have you ever felt like you were lifted "from hell"? How do we lift each other up? How do we help each other stay in the land of the living?