

# A Race to the Finish

John 20:1-18

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Easter Sunday

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

John Claypool tells about a little bank in central Kentucky, founded several years before by a prominent group of farmers. The very idea of a bank in this small town was regarded with suspicion at first. But because of the confidence they felt in the directors, people gradually began to entrust their savings and resources to it. By 1928 most of the economy of the community revolved around that little bank.

Then came the stock market crash of 1929. Word spread that the doors of the bank would be closed and everything lost. Naturally, panic gripped the community. Early that Monday morning, before sunrise, a group gathered outside the little bank and watched despairingly as the directors went in for a fateful meeting. Everything hung on two questions: What could and would the directors do? And did they personally have enough outside resources to make up the deficit, though not being legally bound to use them?

Time seemed to stand still for those people who had everything at stake. Then promptly at opening time, to their unbelieving eyes, the shade went up and the door was unlocked. In an instant everyone knew what that meant – the bank withstood the crisis. The controlling powers had answered affirmatively the two questions about power and willingness. And in the act of opening the door, the spirits of the whole community were lifted and the nature of that institution was revealed.

So the shade went up on Easter morning in John's report. Jesus had both the power and the willingness to withstand the crisis, and his nature was revealed. This is what God could do with what happened – open the door! Remove the stone! Open the way towards a future without fear, filled with joy and possibilities beyond our wildest imagination. For John's Gospel, the same power that unleashed creation was again unleashed with this re-creation, known as resurrection.

Yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* included an article entitled "The Easter Effect," by George Weigel. In it he claims, "By the early fourth century, Christians likely counted for between a quarter and a half of the population of the Roman Empire, and their exponential growth

seemed likely to continue. How did this happen?" When Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the state, he may have simply been a shrewd politician, the article argues. "There is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without weighing the revolutionary effect on those nobodies of what they called 'the Resurrection' -- their encounter with the one whom they embraced as the Risen Lord."<sup>1</sup> The Easter effect had quite an impact on world history apparently. The question today is, Has the Easter effect had any impact on you and me?

Craig Barnes writes, "John tells us that for a while there was a lot of running back and forth to the tomb. This is still what we disciples of Jesus do when he is missing, we run around a lot."<sup>2</sup> I like that description of the anxious scurrying about. It characterizes so much of the activity in our lives and even our churches. When Jesus is missing, we run for our lives and life loses significance and meaning. We run for our lives when we think it is a story without a plot or a destination, a pointless exercise. But we should stop running away from what we fear and instead run towards the future, with determination and purpose.

Not long ago I visited the home of a man who was dying. He was surrounded by his wife, children, and grandchildren, and was being cared for by hospice nurses. We anointed him for his journey home with oil in the sign of the cross on his forehead. Following his death, his wife shared with me a helpful distinction between cure and healing, that she came across years before:

#### Cure vs. Healing

Cure alters what is; Healing offers what might be

Cure is an act; Healing is a process

Cure seeks to conquer pain; Healing deals to transcend pain

Cure ignores grief; Healing assumes grief

Cure rejects death and views it as a defeat; Healing includes death among the blessed outcomes of caring

Cure may occur without healing; Healing may occur without cure

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-easter-effect-and-how-it-changed-the-world-1522418701-?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=3>

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, Craig, "Savior at Large," (Christian Century: March 13-20 2002) p. 16.

Cure separates body from soul; Healing embraces the soul  
Cure combats illness; Healing fosters wellness  
Cure fosters function; Healing fosters purpose  
Cure acts upon another; Healing shares with another  
(Source unknown)

Cure has its place but we cannot forever and always be cured. Thank God for modern medicine! There are remarkable people in the medical profession who do more than bring cures, they bring healing too. I have a pastor friend who entered a hospital corridor to visit a dying parishioner. As he approached the hospital room a doctor was exiting the room, closing the door behind him. The doctor said, "There's nothing more to be done!" My friend replied, "There's nothing more to be done by you!" Jesus promises healing, not cure. Christ promises resurrection, not rescue.

Mary experiences "unseeing" twice in the story. She doesn't recognize those in the tomb and mistakes the Lord for the gardener. It is hard to see clearly through tear-filled eyes. But when she hears her name called from somewhere behind her, and it is the familiar voice of Jesus, she turns around and finally sees him, but not as she expects to see him. In the resurrection of Jesus the future actually broke through to the present. A reality so illogical, unthinkable, impossible, unnatural, and incredible breaks in and her old reality shatters. The coming reign of God in that moment actually came.

The follower of Jesus can see through the eyes of faith that life is filled with meaning and is a story that does not end in death. Death does not have the last word. History and life itself are headed toward a redemptive end on the other side of death. However we understand it, Easter and the resurrection of our Lord happened once but the effect is far reaching and forever.

I wonder how often I have experienced unseeing? Every day I unsee the people panhandling by the freeway entrance. I unsee things all the time that would require something from me. I unsmell the dirty diapers on my grandkids sometimes. I unhear the late night phone calls, pretending to sleep so someone else will answer. And I'm sure that I see what I have come to expect to see, rather than what is often there right in front

of me. Sometimes I even go looking for my glasses only to discover I'm wearing them! What we see is often limited by what we expect to see.

When Jesus called her by name, Mary's whole belief structure began to collapse. At the sound of her name, she was transformed into the first witness of Easter. The voice of Jesus across the abyss of death threw a lifeline between her small logic and the power of God to work wonder. The voice of Jesus shattered Mary's preconceptions and called her forward to new possibility, to a new future. "I have seen the Lord," she told her friends.

We are called to do something in life and to make something of ourselves, but first there is something we must hear and see and receive at the dawn of eternity. We must hear our own name and see our Lord with our own eyes and confess with our own lips the astonishing joy, "I have seen the Lord." This story is not just about what happened to Mary and Peter, and the other disciples; it is about what happens to us!

Here's the thing – I don't believe now because I grew up in a family that believed then. I don't believe in Christ because the church got to me early enough. I don't believe because someone persuaded me that the Bible is true. I don't believe because I have thought it all through on my own. I believe because God's grace once grabbed me and grabs me still in the deepest part of my life, and will not let me go. The Lord keeps coming after me even when I feel like running away from it all. I have heard my name called, and perhaps you have too.

Jesus tells Mary to not "hold onto him." We can't hold onto him. We must learn to trust that he is holding onto us! Hanging onto the Jesus we have known can keep us from the Jesus who knows us better than we know ourselves. It is not that Jesus is forever elusive; it is rather that he is always greater than even our most cherished memory of the way he used to be. Though he is too great to be grasped, he is strong enough to grasp us.

Easter isn't really about squinting just a little harder in order to see Jesus. Easter is about the good news — the news that Jesus has come looking for you and for me. Easter finds us, not the other way around. When we hear our name called, the illusions and delusions that we create to make sense of life and the world around us fall away, like cataracts from

our eyes. Mary didn't need to try harder, though like all of us, she was at risk of missing what was right in front of her. Rather, a figure ground shift took place. Have you seen those drawings when you think it's a candlestick but then you look again and it's two faces looking at each other, or the one which at first appears as an old woman but then a figure ground shift occurs and now it's a young woman in a hat? Easter is a figure ground shift that has led people to see life rather than death as the final word from God. It is the face of Jesus Christ we see when the figure ground shift occurs. It's his voice that we hear.

Walt Whitman once sat listening to an evening lecture on astronomy. A boring lecture! Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer he got up out of his chair and walked out of the stuffy lecture hall for a little air. He left behind the charts, the diagrams and what someone was saying about the stars . . . and he went out into the evening and looked up at the stars for himself. That is what Easter invites us to do. Take a look for yourself. Don't rely upon some boring lecture to describe the beauty and wonder of Easter. Look for yourself and you may just see eternity and hear your name – because Easter finds us. Thanks be to God! Christ is Risen!