

## **Living as Easter People**

*A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church*

Sunday, April 1

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

One day, the absolute best person the world had ever seen or encountered laid dead in a tomb. He loved people, all people, in ways that no one else could ever fully understand. He saw people whom others usually ignored and welcomed them in. He healed people who thought there was no cure for their disease. With him, there was always enough food to eat, always another seat at the table, always an abundance. He met anxiety with peace, despair with hope, and fear with great courage. And his radical way of living completely turned the world upside down.

For those who had journeyed with him and followed him, his death was the end of their world. They loved him. They were in awe of him. Even when they didn't understand him – and even when the life he called them toward was hard – they were still drawn to him. Because they knew that God had been made flesh in him in a way that had never happened before, and now it would never happen again.

Because their beloved friend, teacher, mentor, and Lord was dead. And all of their hope had been buried in the grave right along with him.

But just before sunrise, on the third day after he had been killed on a cross, a woman named Mary Magdalene went to visit his tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away. She immediately ran to the other disciples to tell them the only conclusion she could imagine – that his body had been stolen.

At once, Peter and another disciple, whom Jesus loved, ran as fast as they could to the tomb. They looked in to see linen cloths lying on the ground, and the kerchief that had been used to cover his head was folded neatly by itself. Peter wasn't quite sure what to think, but the disciple whom Jesus loved took one look at the room, and Scripture says he believed.

Meanwhile, Mary was standing outside the tomb, weeping, until someone she believed to be the gardener said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" And she said to him, "Sir, if you have taken his body, please just tell me where he is."

But then, this gardener man said her name, and just the sound of his voice resurrected her heartbroken soul. She looked up and cried out, "Teacher!" and in an instant, her world was changed forever. Our world was changed forever. And Mary went out to share the good news with everyone else - that Jesus is alive.

Friends, this story from the gospel of John is the reason we are all here today on Easter Sunday. It is the story of our faith. Christ is risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

I will admit that I have always been drawn to Mary's part in the story. And it's pretty ironic that today is April Fool's Day, because Mary gets the biggest April Fool's surprise of all when the person she believes to be the gardener turns out to be Jesus.

But this week, as I was reflecting on the text, I actually found myself more drawn to Peter and the unnamed disciple and their unique part in the story. They both run to the tomb as fast as they can when they hear that Jesus' body is missing. They both look in the empty tomb and see the cloth wrappings lying on the ground.

And Scripture tells us that the unnamed disciple goes in, sees, and believes, even though the very next verse tells us that he does not yet understand.

Peter Gomes, who was a theology professor at Harvard and minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, says that preachers all over the world are "bending themselves into pretzels today just to try to make sense of a story that transcends sense."<sup>1</sup> And so what I want to do today is the exact opposite – and to claim that you and I can not even begin to make sense of the resurrection. Neither can Simon Peter or the unnamed disciple, for that matter. They do not understand what happened or how it could have possibly happened, and yet we are told that at least one of them believes anyway.

Because this is exactly what Easter invites us to do, isn't it? Easter beckons us to believe the impossible! Which is why I think the unnamed disciple is one of the very first Easter people in all of Scripture. And here we are, continuing in his trajectory as we seek to live as Easter people almost 2000 years later. Even though we didn't see it happen (no one else did, either), and even though we don't understand it at all, as Easter people, we are invited to boldly proclaim what the world says is completely impossible – that Christ is risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

In her book, *Intensive Care*, Mary Lou Weisman tells the story of her 15-year-old son Peter who was dying from the terrible disease muscular dystrophy. And yet an astonishing thing happened right at the moment of his death. Peter's body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and his mind was confused. He was mainly moaning and talking nonsensically at this point, when suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter looked up at his father, Larry, and said to him, "What does impudent mean?"

Bewildered, Mary Lou and Larry looked at each other, not knowing what this strange question meant. And Peter repeated himself and asked again, "Daddy, what does impudent mean?"

With tears streaming down his face, Larry answered Peter's question. "Impudent, son, means bold. It means to be shamelessly bold." Peter paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and said, "Then put me in an impudent position."

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou positioned Peter's arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an impudent position in the face of death.<sup>2</sup>

Friends, Easter does not mean that death is finished hurting us down here. I know I don't have to remind us of that today – we know the pain of death all too well. Some of us carry with us the pain of death from just weeks or months ago, and others from years ago, but no matter when it happened, the pain of death on this side of eternity never quite goes away. And so I am mindful that while today is a day of celebration, Easter can bring about so many different emotions in us, because this week brings us face to face with the painful realities of death.

But as Easter people, we can face even death in an impudent position. Perhaps it's only because the pain of death is so unbearable that the joy of Easter is so unimaginable. Because in spite of everything this world can do *to* us or take *from* us, in spite of disease and difficulty and despair and even of death – we believe that these things do not get the last word.

As Easter people, we believe that God's love is greater than any hate.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Gomes, "The Courage of Easter Christians," <https://soundcloud.com/harvard/peter-j-gomes-the-courage-of>

<sup>2</sup> Preached in a sermon by Thomas Long, "A Living Hope," <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/124-thomas-long-program-5217>

That God's grace is greater than all our sin.  
That God's light is greater than any darkness that comes our way.  
Because Christ is risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

And as Easter people, we boldly proclaim that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>3</sup> Because friends, Christ is risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

After Peter and the unnamed disciple have seen the empty tomb, and after Scripture tells us that the unnamed disciple believes, what they do next seems pretty anti-climactic. They simply go home.

But my friend, pastor Alan Sherouse, has a different understanding of what is happening here. He says, "It's fitting that the gospel says simply that when that impossible day was over, Peter and the other disciple left the tomb and returned to their homes. Because [home is] where Easter is known. It's where we make decisions about how we will live, what our lives will embody, how we will follow him with hope and joy in our hearts breaking cycles of death and loss and fear and believing in a new creation on its way."<sup>4</sup>

And so Peter and the other disciple go home to where Easter is lived. Even Mary can't stay with Jesus long, as desperately as she wants to. Instead, he says to her, "Do not hold on to me," because he knows that she needs to go home, too - and to share the news of all that has happened.

That's the thing about being Easter people – it means we probably can't stay where we are for very long. It means we can't stay comfortable. Because being called to new life means that we're constantly growing, constantly changing, constantly opening ourselves up to new ways of living as Easter people. And we're constantly being called to bear witness to the good news that Christ is Risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

It's interesting to me that here in one of the most significant stories in all of Scripture, the very first person to believe isn't given a name. Sure, there are various theories about who the beloved disciple might be, but his name is never listed.

But then again, perhaps we do know the name of this disciple, this brave one who dares to step into the darkness of the tomb, to believe the impossible, and to face the world in an impudent position.

It's Linda Dulin.  
It's Kensi and Grace Baker.  
It's Doug and Pat Weaver.  
It's Ali Chappell DeHay.  
It's Harold Brown.  
It's Kay Dunlap.  
It's Jeremy and Katie Crews.  
It's Sheila Smith.  
It's Ron Miller.  
It's Ainsley Singletary.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:38-39, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Alan Sherouse, "Giving Up Death: An Easter Sermon," <http://fbcgso.org/giving-up-death-an-easter-sermon-by-alan-sherouse/>

It's so many more people than I could possibly name today. Because the truth is that at one point or another, the disciple who steps out of the empty tomb and dares to believe the impossible is you and it's me and it's any and all of us who are brave enough to live as Easter people.

It's true that we do not understand exactly what happened in the tomb that day. And to the rest of the world, it may seem completely crazy for us to believe in something so strongly that just doesn't make sense. But what I do understand is this: I can testify over and over and over again to the resurrection that has happened in my life and in yours. And I can boldly and impudently proclaim that Christ is risen from the dead because of the resurrection I've seen in you.

As Peter Gomes tells us, "the evidence of Easter is a reconfigured Easter people, people who are no longer afraid of the dark, people who dare to live by their affections and not by their fears, people who know that they need not die in order to truly experience resurrection living, . . . . people who fear neither death nor life . . . . In short, people such as you and me who aspire to be people like that."<sup>5</sup>

And so, my friends, may we all be so brave as to walk away from the empty tomb today and to dare to live as Easter people. And whatever life brings us, and whatever life takes from us, may we boldly proclaim the words that impudently defy what the world says is impossible: Christ is risen! (*He is risen indeed*).

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Gomes, "What We Forgot to Tell You."