

"No Foolin'!"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Easter Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; April 1, 2018

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 toward 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 around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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.

If you ever want to capture all the attention at a dinner party, just tell everyone you were born in a cult. I know from experience that it works; you should try it sometime! It helps that in my case it's actually true—I grew up in a really fundamentalist, Pentecostal community whose members thought we were going to heaven or hell based on the say-so of the cult leader.

What made the cult so "culty" was its seriousness, a complete inability to laugh or take itself lightly. We were told to be ashamed of delight and joy, because they were ways that the devil would lead you astray. Members should maintain stern solemnity at all times, and this applied to children as well. Playfulness and its close cousin creativity were discouraged. Fiction, friends and fun were forbidden. I got in trouble as a third-grader the weekend I first got glasses, because I spent too much time in childish wonder, comparing the view through and above the glasses. Another time, a child even younger than me was caught playing. As punishment, the cult leader dressed her up as a clown with Wonder Bread bags, and made her parade in front of the group while we were told to laugh at her. We lived by the constant refrain, "No fooling around!" or simply, "No foolin'!"

It's ironic that the faith of my childhood was so joyless, because joy is at the heart of Christianity. And there's no place more joyful than the empty tomb of Christ's resurrection. Not that it was easy to grasp or understand, mind you. Just consider what happens with these disciples in John's resurrection stories. By my count, it takes at least seven different times for the surprise and incongruity of the empty tomb to dawn on them. It's like the physical comedy of the Three Stooges, where each repetition is gradually more sensational. By the end, it's as though the whole scene is practically shouting at these disciples to understand. Mary sees the stone has been removed, but she runs back. Another disciple races to the

tomb first and sees the linen wrappings, but he too misses the clue. Peter goes in the tomb and sees the headpiece in a separate place from the wrappings, and still doesn't get it. The other disciple goes in and believes, we're told, but does not understand. Then Mary sees *angels* who ask why she's weeping in the place of resurrection—but she misses the message. Jesus himself appears, and Mary mistakes him for the gardener. Finally—*finally!*—Jesus says her name, and understanding dawns.

Just when it seems that death and Empire always have the last word, violence is overthrown and the peaceful victor is triumphant over death. I can almost hear the disbelieving laughter, surprise and hugging delight in Mary upon the recognition, which leads Jesus to playfully tell her not to hang onto him so much. He sends her out from the tomb with a mission—tell others what she has seen. She goes and does so, and the first disciples hear the impossible made possible: “I have seen the Lord!” Another of the gospels says that the disciples took Mary's testimony as “an idle tale”. In a world so used to Good Friday crucifixions of every kind, the Good News of death's undoing still sounds like make-believe. Mary must have had to repeat herself too: “I promise, it's true! No foolin'!”

I was taught as a child that playfulness was the opposite of godliness, but the resurrection of Jesus unleashes delightful joy, even in disbelief. No wonder the psalmist says, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation!” What's more, silliness is *still* a tool of deliverance. [Susan Griffin tells the story](#) of the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos, who played an important role in the French Resistance during World War II. Desnos was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis for his political activities. Griffin describes how,

Along with many others who crowd the bed of a large truck...Robert Desnos is being taken away from the barracks of the concentration camp where he has been held prisoner. Leaving the barracks, the mood is somber; everyone knows the truck is headed for the gas chambers. And when the truck arrives no one can speak at all; even the guards fall silent. But this silence is soon interrupted by an energetic [Desnos], who jumps into the line and grabs one of the condemned. Improbable as it is, Desnos reads the man's palm.

“Oh,” he says, “I see you have a very long lifeline. And you are going to have three children.” He is exuberant. And his excitement is contagious. First one man, then another, offers up his hand, and the prediction is for longevity, more children, abundant joy.

As Desnos reads more palms, not only does the mood of the prisoners change but that of the guards too. How can one explain it? Perhaps the element of surprise has planted a shadow of doubt in their minds. If they told themselves these deaths were inevitable, this no longer seems so inarguable. They are in any case so disoriented by this sudden change of mood among those they are about to kill that they are unable to go through with the executions. So all the men, along with Desnos, are packed back onto the truck and taken back to the barracks. Desnos has saved his own life and the lives of others by using his imagination.

Friends in Christ, there is much evil to lament in the world, but the resurrection shows us that God's creativity in resisting and undoing it extends as far as the imagination can conceive. Holy fools like Robert Desnos, like playful children, show us the way through their joy. The cosmic joke that undoes death and violence dawns slowly but surely in the gospel. Easter is the joyful, creative heart of the Christian proclamation. All of Pilate's horses and all of his men couldn't put Jesus Christ back into the ground again! Be free from fear and shame, because God breaks open even death itself, and divine, joyful life reigns forever. So where in the world might we next encounter life instead of death? Will we have eyes to see it? Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! No foolin'!