

Save Our Souls

April 12, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: John 20: 1-18

When I graduated from divinity school, one of my older professors began his baccalaureate speech to our class by describing to us a maritime practice, and according to him, a precision art called semaphore. He spoke of how when he was in the service he was trained to use large, hand held signal flags. Similar to Morse code, or like other forms that rely on visual signals to convey information, the language was internationally recognized and was often used to communicate distress signals to distant shores, ships or aircraft. Talk about distance learning. He described it with eyes closed, as if he was back on some far away training field. There was one signal he was intent on sharing with us, just in case we'd ever need it. The sign for attention came first! Arms and flags waving high and across. Then, left hand low, right hand out. Left hand high, right hand out. Left hand low, right hand out. Over the years, this three-letter international flag symbol has meant different things. "Sink or Swim." "Send Out Someone." Or its most common expression: "Save Our Souls."

I used to think of this as just a good story. But if ever there were a time when we might need to send up an international S.O.S., this is surely it. Similarly, what happens during Holy Week and Easter may seem for many of us like a good story, one of the best even. But have we ever needed its message of hope so viscerally as now? For some of you, young parents stretched to the max, those who can't stand the isolation of this time, those whose anxiety about working or not working has grown unbearable, a white flag of surrender may be a better fit. Wherever we are, whatever signals we are sending up this holy morning, Easter invites us all into a process of surrendering to and letting our souls be saved by the astonishing good news we celebrate today.

So, let's turn to our story from John. And given where we are today, I wonder what you noticed in your hearing. There are two things that caught my attention. First, in verse 1, we learn that "it was still dark" when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. For those of you are feeling like Easter has come too early this year, here's a gentle reminder: it happened when it was still dark. Let's face it. We too are still in the dark. Death tolls are still rising. Our global economy is collapsing. The pandemic is revealing entrenched inequalities and structural racism with searing clarity. Given how desperate these times are, surely, it's a good thing that Easter only begins on Easter morning! It's more than a sunrise, more than a day. Easter is the start of an entirely new season in the Christian calendar. It's not supposed to happen all at once! Instead, it initiates us into an ongoing process of spiritual and social transformation. It inaugurates a new dawn for all creation! And it all began while it was still dark.

Next, after the men have followed Mary and have come and gone from the empty tomb, Mary stands alone weeping outside the tomb. She sees the angels in the tomb and then she turns around and looks right at Jesus standing there, but she doesn't know it's him. Hmmm. Was she not standing close enough? Even when he asks her why she is weeping, she thinks he's a gardener. This is John's nod to the so called first creation, with Jesus tending the garden of a new creation. He says her name. Finally, she recognizes the person who moments ago was a stranger. And then when it seems she's reaching for him, he says: "Do not hold on to me." In other translations, its "do not cling to me," "because I have not yet fully risen to God!" According to the Christian calendar, that doesn't happen for another 40 days at the Ascension. Told you it was a process! Let's not miss this detail though. Jesus is intentionally putting space between Mary and himself!

Strange, no? And oddly timely. What's going on here? If it were the only story where the Risen Christ returns and is a little standoff-ish, I might let it go. But it's not. Think about it! On Easter evening, on the road to Emmaus, in Luke chapter 24: "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Here too, he at first appears as some distant, unknown stranger. Later in John's gospel, we see it again. In chapter 21 "Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias and he showed himself in this way." The disciples are back fishing on a boat. Verse 4: "Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus." The Risen One himself is flagging them down from the shore. It's not until after they've shared breakfast on beach with him that they recognize him. Why do these resurrection stories seem to hold the Risen Christ apart, as if as some unknown stranger, at least at first? Why all the disorientation and distance and lack of recognition?

I came across a helpful passage by the novelist, Iris Murdoch. She reflects on behalf of a character named Barney who had recently attended an Easter Mass. She writes: "The Christ who travels towards Jerusalem and suffers there can be made into a familiar. The risen Christ is something suddenly unknown! The [Easter] metamorphosis had always in the past represented for Barney simply a disappointment, like the ending of a play. He had never thought of it as a starting point. With this shift of view, it became clear to him[for the very first time] that it was the Risen Christ and the not suffering [Jesus] who must be his savior: the absent Christ hidden in God, and not that all too recognizable victim!...What was [now] required of him was something which lay quite outside that deeply worked pattern of [his] suffering, [it] was the plain possibility of change! Perhaps after all that was the message of Easter. Absence not pain would be the rite of his salvation!"

I love that idea! Not the deeply worked patterns of suffering but the plain possibility of change. Not the crucified Jesus only, nor our grasping for that fleeting Easter morning appearance, but the risen and even absent Christ, the one who is not here. We hear this line again and again in the Easter stories. He is not here, for he is risen as he said! He is risen into a new life, enfolded and held in God's eternal love. Because of this miraculous transformation, that plain possibility of change is made available to all of us!

This Lent and throughout this Holy Week, the pattern of human suffering, betrayal and death, and that of Jesus, has been made familiar to us as well, perhaps more so than ever before. Yet today, at Easter, we encounter something suddenly strange and unknown! We encounter a Risen Christ that pulls away from Mary, and from us. Why? To save us from our clinging! To save us from our clinging to what we already know or think we know! It saves us from clinging to our old selves, our old patterns and ways of being. In the extremity of her grief, Mary moves to embrace Jesus as if he is back just as she's known him for years. But Jesus must move forward, ever more deeply into a oneness with God's love. Yes, surely, we can find a profound solace in knowing that God suffers with us and weeps with us at the cross and beyond! Yet Easter draws us *through* that suffering, and into an ever-deeper reality of God's love and mercy that rises in us! The resurrection blows our minds open with mystery and possibility and the promise of fearless living that totally disrupts our old selves and our old patterns! Easter draws us through and overturns all those the well worked patterns of our Good Friday lives and world, draws us through and overturns those old stories we can't help but cling to. At Easter, Christ bids us to not to hold on to any of it, but to let go and to trust that God's love will hold it for us and fill us with something new!

Jesus's caution to Mary, to not hold on, is a gentle way of saying loosen your grip even on what you love most! Trust in God and you'll find there's more that will yet be revealed! Or to Peter, who denied

him, he comes back and says “Peace. It’s ok. You can let go of that guilt now. Own it, yes, but then let it go, man!” To all of us, given that God’s love is stronger than death, he says “you no longer have to be to be afraid, or angry, or guilty, or innocent. You don’t have to be the victim or the identified patient or the victimizer! You don’t have to cling to your need to know, or to be in control, or to be right. God is now calling you to let go your self-sufficiency, or your self-satisfaction, to no longer be defined by your anxiety or your suffering or suffering that you have caused. Easter tells us, blessedly, we don’t have to be as we are because there is more to the story, there is always that plain possibility of change that lies before us. Can we trust this and let go of our ways? Can we open ourselves to a love which is beyond your grasp, and let it grasp us, and fill us and change us? God’s miraculous love and mercy draw us from our old clinging ways into a new and unknown way of being, and *that* is our saving grace!

Paul Farmer, the world-renowned physician and professor of public health who has spent much of life combatting widespread disease in the poorest places on earth shared a profound idea in a column a few weeks back. He said that in order to confront the pandemic we will need something which he called “expert mercy!” “Expert mercy.” I loved that phrase the moment I read it. He writes, “Expert mercy stems from an alchemy that mixes compassionate fellow feeling with interventions that save the sick and slow down spread.” He went on to lay out a high level but ultimately quite practical strategy. He spoke of the medical response required to care of the sick, but he also addressed our social responses. He said we need to be taking expert care to resist the blame game and to confront overt discrimination. And he said we need to be planning for and showing expert care of front-line doctors, nurses. Amen!

Farmer of course was talking about what can save us from the pandemic. Expert mercy is a powerful thing and its surely working to save lives wherever Farmer’s protocols are being followed. But let’s consider today the power and assurance of not merely expert mercy that can see us through a crisis, until things get back to “normal.” Imagine not expert mercy, but perfect mercy! Imagine the perfect mercy of the Risen Christ that ushers us into a new and yet unknown story for lives and our world. How strange and unfamiliar indeed! How glorious and amazing! To meet Christ’s perfect mercy, walking beside us, a mercy that sees our every sin and loves us still. A perfect mercy that tells us that ‘it’s ok not to be ok’ right now because the story isn’t over, that God’s love is so much bigger than all of this! What an opportunity we are living through, to be made new, to ask ourselves anew, who am I and who am I becoming now, or for that matter, what can we become together? What new and different church and community and economy and ecology at this dawn of a new creation!

When we send up our flags from wherever we are, when we signal our need for help, we can look across whatever distance and see the divine response, coming to us in tender and perfect mercy, love and light! And today, God *sends out someone*, from the tombs of our isolation, sadness, grief and sends in someone, right into our hearts, right into our world, to encounter us again, and again, to walk by our side, as a stranger and a friend. In moments of absence or presence, let that perfect mercy be your constant companion! Let it enfold the dead and dying. Let it enfold you. Allow it to be your hope and joy! Let this mercy rise up in you that you may share it, fearlessly, in loving kindness with yourself and the world. Amen.



