

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 20:1-18

I told you last week that Sunday is coming, and here it is; and it's just not any Sunday, it's Resurrection Sunday! Hallelujah! This is GREAT News! Because Jesus conquered death, we have the assurance of new life, everlasting life, if we choose to believe and follow the living Christ.

Nearly 20 years ago, at the height of Operation Desert Storm, Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. The message stated that her son, Clayton, had stepped on a landmine in Kuwait and was killed. Ruth later wrote these words: "I can't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For 3 days I just wept. I expressed anger and loss. For 3 days people tried to comfort me, but nothing worked ... the loss was simply too great.

But 3 days after she received that message, the phone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Mom, it's me." It's Clayton. I'm alive. Ruth said, "I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice and realized he really was alive. The message was all a mistake. She said, "I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels because my son, whom I thought was dead, was actually alive."

This morning, we come to a story that is very similar. The disciples, family members, and those who were at the cross have all received the news that Jesus has died.

Mary's experience that morning at the tomb where Jesus' body was put to rest was also similar. Her distress over Jesus' body being gone was understandable. Just the thought of the possibility that someone stole Jesus' body was heart wrenching. It's a curious thing that the scripture leaves us thinking that Mary was not stunned when she found angels where Jesus' body should have been. That certainly would have caught my attention; it even would likely have scared me. She was more disturbed that his body was gone.

And then, when Mary turned from the tomb, she did not recognize that the man standing in front of her was Jesus. Why she did not recognize him until he spoke to her has often made me wonder. Didn't she look at him? If she did, I guess I think she should have recognized him. Besides, Jesus told his followers that he would return in three days. Mary was a follower; she surely knew this. And, really, if Jesus could bring Lazarus back from the dead after being in a tomb for a few days, wouldn't she have thought it was possible that Jesus could do the same for himself? I suppose, however, I can understand why the possibility of Jesus returning from the dead would have been hard to conceive, especially after the torture his body suffered during the crucifixion.

Because we know how the story ends, it's too easy for us to criticize Mary's inability to recognize Jesus. We know from the Word that Jesus arose from the grave, and he lives forevermore. Yet, like Mary, don't you think we too find it difficult to recognize Jesus' presence in our own lives? Of course, like Mary, we sometimes cannot see him standing right in front of us.

Like Mary, who knew Jesus' body was put in that tomb, we can be distracted by what we understand, or by what we are convinced we know. We can get tunnel vision and never consider the possibility that Jesus could stand right in front of us saying something like... "You think you know everything, but listen to me; you don't. I am here with you and I want to show you something better." That essentially is what happened to Mary when she finally recognized Jesus,

and he turned her nightmare into the best outcome she could have ever imagined. Jesus was alive.

Also, like Mary, we might miss seeing Jesus in our lives when our emotions are so overwhelming that we find it impossible to focus on anything other than what has us upset. Hard times, physical or emotional pain, anger or frustration can thrust us into crying out for Jesus' help and companionship, but if we continue to listen only to the cry of our own voice rather than listening for his voice, we miss Jesus again.

Likewise, we can get so very excited and happy about something good in our lives that we totally miss recognizing Jesus' presence and guidance that led us to the reason for our delight, and we neglect the opportunity to thank Jesus for our good fortune and joy. Sometimes, our emotions might become our own worst enemy. We can block all kinds of things out when we are consumed by our emotions, even Jesus.

We may also miss seeing Jesus in our lives because we are simply facing the wrong direction. We may have drifted away from God's straight and narrow path. We may have given into the pleasures of this world. We may have stopped praying, read our bible or attending church, and simply lost touch with Jesus.

We may not realize, or want to realize, we are facing the wrong direction until our world comes crashing down around us, and by that point we are almost too ashamed to turn and face the right direction, and look at the face of Jesus. Amazingly, Jesus doesn't care. He's just glad we finally turned around.

Today's choir anthem calls us to awaken our souls to the risen Christ. Arise to a new, glorious life with Jesus. Go forth and spread the good news that Jesus lives and has freed us to live a better, more fulfilling, free from the burden of sin life. Go forth, tell everyone the good news; you might help someone find Jesus.

Lee Strobel tells the story of a time when he felt God prompting him to go and share an Easter invitation in the business office of the newspaper where he worked. He didn't know why. But he listens to God. When he arrived, he saw his friend who was working in the business office.

It was an average routine day, and I was packing my stuff up to go home and I felt like God was kicking me in the butt and real specifically to go into the business office of the newspaper and invite my atheist friend to come to Easter services at our church. Because Easter was coming up, I thought this is great. If God is really leading me to do this so specifically,

This is gonna be spectacular. He's probably gonna repent right there, get on his knees, and receive Christ. This is gonna be fantastic!

So, I walk over to the new business office with great anticipation. I walk in and look around. I see my friend behind his desk.

Perfect, so I said, "Hey how are you doing?"

He said, "I'm doing great."

I said, "Hey, you know Easter is coming up?"

He said, "Lee, I'm an atheist; I don't observe Easter."

I said, "Yeah, I know, but Easter is when we remember that Jesus rose from the dead."

He said, "No, he did not."

I said, "Well, actually there is good historical evidence he did." I began to talk to him about the evidence historically Jesus rose from death, and I'm trying to get in a bunch of stuff in and you could see his eyes are glazing over. So, I thought, okay this isn't going well.

So, I took another tact, I said, "So, um, yeah, do you do you ever think about God?"

He said, "No."

Okay, um, I said, "Do you have any questions about God?"

He said, "No."

Okay, um, Hey look, I said, "I know you like music; our church has got great music. Why don't you come to Easter services? I think you'll like the music."

He said, "I don't want to go to your stupid church."

"Hey okay, um thanks. Um.. I'll talk to you, you know where my office is if you ever have a question."

I thought I screwed up and I thought "What the heck was that. Why did God tug me so specifically to go and invite him to church and talk about Jesus and the resurrection? To this day he's still an atheist, and I'm telling you this bothered me for years. But I'll tell you now the rest of the story.

Several years after that, by then I was a pastor at this church outside Chicago, I'd preached on a Sunday and a guy came up to me and said, "Can I just shake your hand and thank you for the spiritual influence you've had in my life."

I said, "Well, that's very nice. Who are you?"

He said, "Well, let me tell you my story. A few years ago, I lost my job and I was panic stricken. I didn't have any money in the bank. I was gonna lose my house. I was going to lose my car. I went to the newspaper and I said, "Hey you have any odd jobs I can do to earn a buck at the newspaper?"

And the guy said, "Well, can you tile floors?" and I said well "Yeah I've tiled my bathroom. I think I can tile the floor."

The guy said, "Well, we need some tiling installed and repaired at the newspaper, so if you can do that we can pay you for a while."

So, he said, "I went to work at the newspaper. One day, an average day before Easter, I was in the business office of the newspaper, and I was on my hands and knees on the floor behind a desk working on some tile on the floor, and you walked in the door. And I don't even think you knew I was there. You start talking to this guy about God; you start talking about the resurrection; you start talking about the historical evidence that Jesus really did rise; you started inviting him to church. But this guy was shutting you down, and I'm on my hands and knees behind this desk. And my heart's beating fast. I'm thinking I need God. I need to go to church. So as soon as you left, I called my wife. I said, "We're gonna go to church on Easter." She said, "What!." I said, "Yeah."

We came to your church that Easter. I came to faith. My wife came to faith, and our teenage son came to faith. And I just wanted to thank you."

I thought to myself, "This is a new form of evangelism." Ricochet evangelism is where you share your faith, and it bounces off a hard heart. You just don't know where it's gonna go.

Friends this is the unexpected adventure of the Christian life. You don't want to miss this we can't do this in heaven this is our one chance so let's ask God to take us on these unexpected adventures. Awake, Arise, Go Forth!

(Choir Anthem: "Awake Arise!")

Our Savior, Jesus lives. He is always with us. He lives within and through us. He conquered death and walks with us each and every day. He's ready to help us conquer the battles we face in our lives. We're never alone. He's ready to point out the way that will lead us down the road that will ensure our life journey will be a precursor to an everlasting life with him and our Heavenly Father.

April 5, 2025 - "Christ Is Risen!"

Go Forth, knowing that Jesus lives! Look for him in your life. Listen for his voice calling your name. Amen.