

**Sermon Series: Questions God Asks**  
**“Why are you crying?” by Jason Byassee**  
**John 20:13**

**Boone UMC**  
**April 5 2015**

Jesus' resurrection changes everything, right down to the way we talk to each other. At Easter and for the 50 day Easter season thereafter Christians have always addressed one another this way, I say “Christ is risen” and you say “He is risen indeed.” Let's try it. Good, now, in good Trinitarian fashion, Christians often say this three times, here we go. Good, not let's ratchet up the difficulty. I should say if you're with us on holy days like Easter I know I've done this before, I have other sermons, this is just my once a year Easter shtick, forgive me, it's too much fun to pass up on. Christians say this in Greek, the language of the New Testament, this way, *Christos aneste* and you say<sup>1</sup> *alethos aneste*. Got that? *Christos aneste/alethos aneste*. Good. Three times. Christ is risen. Amen. You probably didn't realize you could speak in tongues.

The story I'm about to read to you is too good *not* to be true. You've heard of things that are too good to be true. You've won a free cruise or a dead relative in Cameroon has left you an oil fortune or whatever. We all know, too good to be true. This story is something else. Too good *not* to be true. Here's why. If you were making up a story, you'd make it *believable*, right? Realistic. Well. This story has holes in it. Big ones.<sup>2</sup> If you were making up a story with a witness it wouldn't be Mary Magdalene. Women couldn't testify in court in the ancient world. They were considered flighty and unreliable. The bible sees clearer—women are more trustworthy than us men, Jesus counts on them and they do not fail him, unlike the male disciples. But Mary? Dodgy personality, bad girl past, demons and men for money and here she is at his tomb. Consider the source, you sure about her? Then Peter and John race to the tomb. John, writer of this gospel, calls himself the “disciple Jesus loved.” Modest. Peter the failure of failures, is the first to go in. *Then they both go home*. Good job guys! Mary sticks around, sees Jesus, *and doesn't recognize him*. She wants to go find the corpse and carry it off (good luck with that). When he says her name, he won't let her hug him. The story is as confusing as real life, as chaotic as all our lives. And these three losers, Mary and Peter and John, are the first witnesses to the greatest event in history. If we were writing it we'd make it more believable, more dramatic, less ordinary and everyday. But God is in our everyday business bringing about resurrection, to people who are as big a losers as us! Chuck Colson, one of Richard Nixon's aids during Watergate, said he had proof of the resurrection—he knew how hard it was to get twelve people to stick to the same lie. Friends let's stand and sing and turn and listen to this story that's too good not to be true.

*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. 2 So she ran and went to Simon*

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<sup>1</sup> “Alethos Aneste”

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imagiva.com/donatello/st-mary-magdalen.jpg>

*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.” 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. 4 The two of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go on. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings laying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*11 But Mary stood outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 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. 13 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.” 14 When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping, for whom are you looking?” 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.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17 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 to your Father, to my God and to your God’.” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he said these things to her.*

That’s the word of God, it belongs to you, the Easter people of God, thanks be to God.

Back to how *we’d* have done things differently than God—I imagine a resurrection being glorious,<sup>3</sup> sort of like this painting from the Middle Ages. Jesus looks lit from within, he fires like a sun rising and his enemies fall like dead men, it’s more dramatic than a flat canvas should be. I mean, it’s a resurrection, it’s sort of dramatic, make it big, God. But that’s not how God writes our story. Just some heartbroken followers wandering aimlessly to the tomb, running back and forth (there’s more running here than anywhere else in the gospels combined),<sup>i</sup> clumsily fumbling the greatest news in history. God must have a lot of work to do to save people like us.

Here’s how else God doesn’t tell the story. It’s not like the story of Lazarus. You may remember Mary and Martha’s brother and Jesus’ friend died and was in the tomb 4 days. When Jesus asked them to roll the stone away they didn’t want to, prompting one of the greatest verses in the King

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/grunewald/crucifixion/christ.jpg>

James Bible,<sup>4</sup> “Already he stinketh.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus orders Lazarus to come out and he does, but how? I mean look at the guy, all mummied up, tight as a tamale.<sup>6</sup> How’s he walk like that? The Jews used a two-part burial, first wrap the dead person for a year till the flesh had rotted off and then put the bones in a smaller box to reuse the tomb. Lazarus is ordered to come out, wrapped all up, needs help to get out, and then poor guy has to die a second time later. That’s *not* what happened to Jesus. He never dies again. He’s gone through death and hell and busted out the other side, and he leaves the way out of hell open so we can all follow.<sup>7</sup> “He saw the linen wrappings laying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.” Grave robbers don’t un-wrap corpses and fold up grave clothes to cart off naked dead people. And unlike Lazarus, Jesus doesn’t need help getting unwrapped. He’s not been stolen. He’s not a mummy. He has defeated death, and is free of death altogether.

The disciples don’t know what they’re seeing. They didn’t expect this, so they can’t see it. Some Jews believed there would be a resurrection, the Pharisees. Some others didn’t—the Sadducees said come on, get real. But the Pharisees and we Christians took a wager on God. God had promised to be faithful. Plenty of Jews die without God being faithful. So God must be planning a resurrection. It’s a thin hope, a fool’s hope, but hey, God made the universe out of nothing. *But!* Resurrection was supposed to happen at the end of time. All would be raised in our bodies for God to judge, and separate the righteous from the wicked. *This* is odd—the resurrection of one man, not all, here in the middle of time, not the end. Jesus’ resurrection is the *beginning* of the end then. God will raise all of us one day. For now, he’s started raising us by raising Jesus. All who are a part of the body of Christ will have his Spirit blown into our dead bodies again one day to rise like him. Do you see the point? Christianity is not just about going to heaven when you die. It’s about resurrection as God’s way to make all creation new. This is an impossibly gaudy hope in addition to being a fragile frail one. Can it be true?

One of my sons said recently, “Wouldn’t it be great if Mr. Buck came alive again?” Buck Robbins was the patriarch of our church, just died in the past year or so. He might’ve asked the same about Cheryl Marshbanks or any of the other saints we’ve lost recently. I miss Buck’s half cocked smile and movie star wavy hair. I miss more his wisdom and kindness to children and strictness with me. It feels like a question from fantasy doesn’t it? Yes dear that’s nice go back to watching Disney. But it’s actually the profoundest resurrection hope. The bible says he will come alive again. He’s with Jesus now. But one day he’ll be with us all again, more in the flesh than he ever was in his wonderful life. God loves flesh and became flesh and will save flesh. Resurrect it. Creation is so good God plans to lose no part of it, but to make it whole.

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<sup>4</sup> John 11:39 kjv

<sup>55</sup> <http://uploads4.wikiart.org/images/giotto/raising-of-lazarus.jpg>

<sup>66</sup> <http://images.oca.org/icons/lg/GreatLent/lazarus.JPG>

<sup>7</sup> This part of Jn 20:6-7

Peter and John head home like I said. Biggest news in world history and they got to go watch the basketball on tv or something. Mary sticks around and is in tears. I wonder what you make of the tears? A friend of mine learned she was pregnant recently and she projectile cried. 'I'm 40!' She said. And the doctor said "Good luck!" Think of tears that come when things are so good, so beautiful, you have no other response. Or tears of pain, the most common kind. Mark Twain said human beings are the only animals who blush—or who need to. Tears show us at our most human. Mary is in tears. This may explain why *she* sees the angels in the tomb where Peter and John saw nothing. Maybe angels can only be seen through tears.<sup>ii</sup> Don't be afraid of tears. They're a gift. The Eastern Orthodox Church speaks of tears as a second baptism. Tears remind us of the waters that wash away our sin.<sup>8</sup> The psalmist says God gathers all our tears in a bottle and writes down the reason for them in a wineskin. Long after other records are gone—like who earns what salary, who's punished for what, what our faults are, God will remember our tears. And will mix them in a concoction to make new life.

Mary has this little conversation with the gardener.<sup>9</sup> "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Ok, you'll cart off a dead body all by yourself, good plan Mary. She's out of her mind with grief. They tore him apart and now they won't even let her have the solace of a place to mourn him. This is why we bury our dead, scatter their ashes in a special place, it's why our church is going to the trouble to build a columbarium, it is a decent human thing to grieve those we lose and honor their remains. Mary wants that, and it's denied. And while she protests, Jesus is right there. Why does she think he's the gardener? Maybe because he's gardening! Overalls, pulling weeds, tenderly planting seeds. Dirt under his fingernails, back aching, these gardens are a lot of work you know! He's restoring the Garden of Eden that he planted in the first place. He's making right all we have made wrong.

And Mary can't see it until he says her name. Mary. The name her parents gave her. The name God knew she would have from before time. The name other men had spoken with cruelty. The name he speaks now with kindness unimaginable. Mary. She says his title back in Hebrew (in big moments the bible speaks in tongues): rabbouni. It means teacher, or even grander it means something like exalted one (I suggest we call our teachers that around here . . .). Jesus is still teaching her—*this* gardener is God, the one in the tomb is alive again and is making all things new.

But he won't let her hug him.<sup>10</sup> This is an odd rejection. What more would you want to do than hug someone resurrected? I imagine heaven sometimes and imagine hugging everybody—lost loved ones, friends, strangers, Jesus himself. But no. "Do not hold on to me," he says.<sup>11</sup> This strange scene is one of the most painted in the history of Christian art for reasons I can't quite

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 56:8

<sup>9</sup> John 20:15

<sup>10</sup> John 20:17

<sup>11</sup> <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Ostern-maria.jpg>

fathom. What's it mean? He's back, but it's not like when we go back to where we went to high school. He's not back and ready to party just like old times. No, his identity as Lord of the universe is beyond dispute now. No one can hold on to him, because he is Lord of all of us. She *will* have a relationship with her Lord again. And so will everyone else who hears the gospel. He's hers, but not only hers. He's all of ours. Until all of us hug him, none of us will. There is still more to look forward to friends.

Jesus gives this strange little speech. If there's anything Jesus does its give strange little speeches. Be clearer! Sheesh. Anyway.<sup>12</sup>

*“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 to your Father, to my God and to your God.”*

Something has happened there. A change of address, did you notice it?

My dissertation director was a very formal German man named Reinhard Huetter, I loved him and love him still. When I was his student I was to call him Dr. Huetter. He called me Jason. It's just how it worked. But the moment he came out of the little room and extended his hand to congratulate me for defending my dissertation and being a doctor now he said “Congratulations Dr. Byassee. You must call me Reinhard now.” Our status had changed. I had a title. He had a first name of the sort friends and equals use. One of the great moments in my life.

Jesus says to Mary to tell everybody<sup>13</sup> “I am ascending to my Father.” This isn't surprising. Jesus has called God “Father” throughout.<sup>14</sup> “*And your Father.*” Now *that's* surprising, a change in status. As big a losers as John, Peter, and Mary? As you, me, her over there and him? Can call God Father now? Daddy? With the resurrected Jesus in our hearts we can all be his sisters and brothers, sons and daughters of the only and most high God.<sup>15</sup> “To my God and your God.” Jesus' God is *our* God now—betrayers and evaders and sinners that we all are, God wills to be our God, and to have us be his people. Ours is changed with the resurrection. Don't hold on to me, but go tell everybody God is our God now, and we are daughters and sons, we're to call him dad.

And she goes and tells. This is awkward if you think women shouldn't preach. Mary is called in some ancient Christian traditions “The apostle to the apostles.”<sup>16</sup> She's the one who tells the others. Had she not, we'd all have just wandered back to our pitiful little pre-resurrection lives. But with this new news we drop everything and tell everyone that all things are different. Every tear recorded. Every wrong made right. Every tomb is shaken. And every notion we *had* of

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<sup>16</sup> <http://contemplativecottage.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/mary-tell-the-disciple.jpg>

God is incomplete. They all need to be irradiated now with the light of the resurrection, this one whom the tomb couldn't contain, will fill the whole world with himself.

Christos aneste. Christ is risen. Happy Easter. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> N.T. Wright's comment.

<sup>ii</sup> NT Wright's matchless suggestion in his *John for Everybody* commentary.