

## Fools for Christ

Easter sermon by John Strommen on John 20:1-18 April 1, 2018

When my father was a young man, he was a pastor and leader in the Lutheran Free Church, a nationally based Lutheran denomination which later became part of the ELCA. Anyway, he was proposing some major changes in youth ministry to help folks update programs and move into the 1950's. Did I mention my dad is 99 years old? Just had his birthday yesterday!

As he visited churches, his proposal was often countered by very persuasive arguments like, "We've never done it that way before!" One time, he was presenting in a small church in North Dakota and an elderly, little, Norwegian lady stood up to let my dad have it. "If Jesus knew what you were doing today in his church, he would roll over in his grave!"

I think *someone* needed to hear an Easter sermon! But discretion being the better part of valor, my dad declined. Perhaps two angels appeared to her in the parking lot and said, "Woman, why are you ranting? Jesus is not in his grave! We've known this for 2,000 years!" Sometimes, for people dead-set against change, it's easy to forget that the living Christ is doing new things in the world!

Well, it's April Fools' Day today, and while that little Norwegian lady played the fool that night, to most people in the world, we who *believe in the resurrection* are the fools. This was especially the case in the first couple centuries after Christ. A god becoming human and being executed? A man rising from the dead? Christians were commonly referred to as fools for believing so. In response, the Apostle Paul memorably wrote in I Corinthians that we who follow the crucified and risen Christ are, and I quote, "Fools for Christ." So be a proud fool!

So Easter and April Fools' Day kind of belong together after all!

In our story today, the grieving Mary is confronted by an empty tomb, and then by angels, who ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary didn't get that this was a statement, not a question: "Why are you weeping?" really means, "You don't need to weep, for he lives."

Then she sees Jesus, but mistakenly thinks it's the gardener. The possibility that Jesus has left death behind and now stands before her has not yet occurred to her. The "gardener" also asks, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Well, she just wants to know where Jesus' body is.

Then Jesus says, "Mary." And in the midst of her fog and her grief, her faith allows her to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd calling to one of his sheep. So she happily responds, "Teacher!"

Teacher, indeed, and more than that: savior, even brother. As God who became flesh, teaching and healing, suffering and dying, rising and ascending, Jesus himself became a pathway to God. A relationship with Jesus meant, and means, sharing in the family of God, the community of God - the mystery of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. As Jesus said to Mary, *my father is now your father*. And to the disciples: *my father's house is now your house*. As the Gospel of John tells us, to all who receive Christ, *he gave them power to become children of God*. Now that's belonging! And this family, this

household lasts forever. Yes, you have your own quarters, you may raid the refrigerator when you like, the flat screen is large and all the cable channels are there. And, oh yes, we eat meals together as a family!

And as Jesus asks Mary to send word of Jesus' resurrection to "my brothers," the actual translation of "brethren" is gender neutral and means brothers *and sisters*. This family of God is not just for the men. Nor is it just for your tribe. There is an open table at these meals!

Now, you wouldn't be here today unless you had faith, a faith that allows you – like Mary – to see and hear the risen Christ who is loose in the world speaking of this new family! And though most often we are *not* looking for them, there are gardeners in our midst...who are not just gardeners, but signs and embodiments of the resurrected Christ. And they will ask us, "Why are you weeping? There is a new creation of which you are a part, right now," they will say. "And there are often glimpses of this creation. Therefore, keep your head up."

Where do you see signs of resurrection, new creation? Through whom? Is there someone for you like my friend Walter, who reminded me to keep loving my dear brother David who died, because he was not far off, but in the next room. You know, the next room in that one household where Jesus is your brother. "Why are you weeping?"

Or do you think Christ is doing a new thing in the Parkland youth who have stepped up to create a movement? Not everyone does, but I sure do. It's biblical to beat our swords into plowshares to establish peace. I think we all know what swords are today.

Let me share with you two images of resurrection reverberating in this life, of gardeners who weren't just gardeners.

First, from literature and film, I give you *Frankie and Johnny*, a story full of Easter, empty tombs and victorious love. Frankie is a waitress, deeply scarred by an abusive ex-husband and now afraid to love. Regularly, she gazes across the street from her NY apartment into the apartment of a man and woman who live there. There she sometimes sees a mirror of her own story, as the man repeatedly abuses the woman. For Frankie, this "Rear Window" like ritual is like peering into her own tomb that has made her dead inside.

Enter a good and decent man named Johnny, who loves Frankie – and Frankie might love Johnny – if only she could trust again and leave her tomb of despair behind. Then early one morning as she is brushing her teeth, she hears on the radio a song dedicated to her by Johnny: *Pavane for a Dead Princess*. "Pavane" means dance, and the dead princess is, of course, Frankie. Frankie hears this as a love song to her, and it coaxes her from her tomb. Perhaps Johnny and *Pavane* are more than just a guy and a song.

Then, in an epiphany, she looks across the street and sees an empty tomb and maybe a resurrection. The man in the apartment, you see, is desperate because he sees only coat hangers where her clothes used to be. She is risen, and left her tomb! Here is a short clip of this scene from the 1991 film...

Jesus the Christ has declared that you are a part of a new creation, a new family based on the love of God. Are there gardeners in your midst *who are not really gardeners?*

For the final image today, let me share with you an encounter on a boat I'll not soon forget. It happened several years ago when I was on a three hour ferry from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to the island of Zanzibar, which is 98% Muslim. So, there were many dark skinned African Muslims, but there were a few Arabic looking people as well. One Arabic Muslim family stood out: a woman with the traditional head scarf and her two children – a girl probably 10 years old or so, and a boy about 6 or 7. They were sitting out on the deck in the sunshine. I was on the same deck, but separated by about 30 feet and quite a few people.

I looked at them, wondering what this innocent looking family was thinking of me, someone obviously from the west and probably Christian. I was well aware that the mother's cultural perceptions about me might be as uncharitable as how we often perceive Muslims in our culture. I imagined the mother probably tightening her hold on her kids, making sure they didn't wander over to me, and that made me sad.

Then something interesting happened. We made eye contact, and I smiled at them and nodded my head. Then the little boy, with his mother's consent, started making his way over to me. Since the sea was a bit rough and the boat was pitching back and forth, he weaved back and forth as he headed over to me. When he arrived, he stood in front of me, grinning widely. Then he put up his right hand for a high five. And so we high-fived, and he grinned even more widely. That boy saw me not through the lens of our broken world, but through the lens of a different world - simply as another human being, an intriguing white skinned human being with no hair. But his message to me was, "I am your friend." Then he started weaving back to his mom. Later I met them and took a picture.

It didn't occur to me right away, but upon reflection I realized that through that little boy's actions, someone was asking a question: *Why are you weeping?* We are part of the same family, he and I - the human family - for whom Christ died and rose and who Christ seeks to unite. It mattered not that the boy was probably not a Christian. The risen Christ, you see, is loose in the world as a new creation, and, as such, can appear through whomever he wishes. The boy's simple act of friendship was a reverberation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, where God gathered the whole human race together with good news. The *risen* Christ is the promise of reconciliation between God and people, between people and people. This brings hope where suspicion and fear linger.

In your lives, I invite you to act on your faith and pay attention to when the gardener may not be the gardener, but a Word from above. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

This might make us fools to some, but today is our day. We are fools for Christ! Amen.

