

1 Easter Sermon, April 24, 2011

Texts: Psalm 118:1-2,14-24, John 20:1-18, Colossians 3:1-4

Title: "Amazing"

I don't know if you know it, but my very first summer job was working for the USDA in a honeybee lab. At the end of the summer, they told me to buzz off.

Then I got a job in an orange juice factory, but I got canned. I just couldn't concentrate.

Later, I worked in the woods cutting trees, but I just couldn't hack it. They gave me the ax.

After that I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it, I couldn't cut the mustard.

I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining.

So, finally, I found a good gig in professional wrestling. They called me the string bean. I wore a green body suit with green pointed shoes and a green cap with a string out the end. When my opponents pulled the string, which they always did, it peeled off my outer body suit, revealing another green one underneath. It was one of those trademark things.

When they would try to grab my pointy shoes, I would leapfrog over them, so that sometimes they called me the jumping bean. I perfected my gravelly abrasive voice, saying: "Betcha don't eat *your* vegetables." When they would tell me my face was ugly, I would say, "At least I'm a human bean!"

I was usually cast as the villain, so when I did win, it was a real victory.

It was amazing.

It's a lot like the Easter story. It's amazing. You don't quite believe it. You don't see how Jesus could become alive again after being dead two days. It doesn't make any sense. But on some level you know it's true, because you've seen victory come out of defeat. You've seen life come out of death.

The Easter Story, when you really think about it, is incredible. But the story seems to have lost it's power to amaze us. We hear the story every year. It's become commonplace. The Easter story doesn't amaze because it is so familiar – or to some people so strange and far away.

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We would be much more amazed if the Brewers won the World Series.

We are witnesses to incredible things every day, but we are seldom truly amazed by them.

We ride in comfort for miles powered by the exploding vapor of a liquid whose refining methods were invented less than a hundred years ago. It's incredible. But it doesn't amaze us.

We eat bananas and oranges that we could not grow in our climate. And we eat them fresh! We eat fresh cauliflower and lettuce out of season. It's a minor miracle, but it doesn't amaze us.

Modern medicine has extended the lifespan of people with diabetes and heart disease sometimes 20 or 30 years, yet we aren't amazed. We take it for granted that the drugs that enable life will just be available.

Psalm 118 gives us a few clues to amazement.

Psalm 118 was originally written to be sung by the king and the priests and the people, as the king came in from a battle. It was meant to be sung as part of a liturgy in the temple, a liturgy of survival. It is a song of victory, but even more than that, a song of being amazed at surviving the battle – living to tell the tale.

So the king returns home from the battlefield and says,

I praise the LORD for answering my prayers and saving me.

The stone that the builders tossed aside has now become the most important stone.

Then the people respond,

The LORD has done this, and it is amazing to us.

This day belongs to the LORD! Let's celebrate and be glad today.

Do you hear in those words a sense of surprise, of happiness, almost giddiness for being saved on the battlefield?

That sense of amazement in the Psalm is echoed by Mary Magdalene in the Gospel reading, when Mary suddenly realizes that this man with her in the garden is not a gardener, but Jesus himself. Mary cries out, "Teacher!" and falls at the feet of Jesus. It is sudden and complete amazement.

Do you know the poet, ee cummings? He was an American poet in the earlier part of the 20th century. His trademark was that he didn't capitalize any words in his poems.

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One of his most famous poems was written just after World War I. He had served as an ambulance driver in the war, and was sent to a French prison camp because he was suspected of treason. He had written home that he could not bring himself to "hate the Germans." He was released in 1918 after 3-1/2 months in a prison camp, and wrote these words:

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

That is, I think, a good description of amazement, and a testimony to the power of life over death, and love over all. You might even call the poem a little silly, because it just doesn't follow the rules of grammar, but tromps all over them. It just doesn't fit within the context of normal.

And I think that's a clue to how we might appreciate Easter more fully; not with our rational logic, but with a sense of hope and a sense of humor.

In fact, when we get too concerned about just exactly how Jesus was raised from the dead (was it a spiritual or a physical resurrection?), humor helps us get past the details to the real meaning.

That's why I started out the sermon with humor. The stories about my former employment were not true, except for the one about working at a honey bee lab.

Often, when we are amazed, when we can't quite believe something, we laugh.

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In the book of Genesis, Sarah laughed at the idea that she would bear a son in her old age, and that's why her son was named Isaac, which means laughter. Sarah was amazed at even the possibility of bearing a child. It seemed ludicrous, so she laughed.

Now think about the Easter story.

Imagine you are hearing the story for the first time. Imagine you don't know the end of the story yet. A storyteller is spinning the tale, saying:

Now, Jesus always rose above the situation somehow. He had known what Peter was going to do, and he'd slipped a zinger to Pilate about the truth. And Jesus managed even on the cross to frustrate those self-important high priests. They didn't like the sign over Jesus' head, that read "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Judeans." Jesus even rose above the situation when he looked at his mother, and told his best friend to take care of her like a son took care of his mother.

Well, the story didn't end at the cross, or when Joseph from Arimathea lent his tomb to bury Jesus. No, there was bound to be more.

Mary Magdalene, who was one of Jesus' favorite people, went to the tomb early Sunday morning. And she got freaked out when she saw the tomb was open. So she ran back and got Peter, that bumbler, along with Jesus' best friend, and they ran to the tomb. Jesus' best friend won the race. But it was stick-your-foot-in-your-mouth Peter who went in. The body was missing. You can imagine them scratching their heads. But there were clues to the mystery. The strips of cloth that had been tied around Jesus were neatly placed there, and the cloth that had been around his head was lying by itself.

If they'd had a police department, Peter would have gone to the police to complain about grave robbing. Instead, they just went home.

Mary Magdalene, who had followed the men back to the tomb, just stayed there, weeping. But since the Peter and Jesus' best friend hadn't really done anything worth mentioning, she decided to look for herself. Something even stranger happened. There were two men dressed in dazzling white inside

I kid you not. How they got in there, who knows? They weren't in there when Peter and that other disciple went in. And Mary Magdalene was there the whole time after Peter and the other guy left.

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Instantly, Mary's tears stopped. This was a puzzle. This was scary. In unison, the angels (that's what they were) asked Mary, "Why are you crying?"

This is not what you expect from angels. They usually say something like "be not afraid," or "behold I bring you news." These angels maybe hadn't been trained well enough.

Mary, too astounded too weirded out to do anything else, answered the question.

"Somebody's taken away the body of the most important man in the world, the one I've been following. I don't know what they did with it."

And what should happen but Mary heard the crunching of gravel behind her, and turned around. There was a man (actually, it was Jesus, but she didn't realize that it was Jesus) and he asked her the same question. "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

When you think about it, it's a pretty silly question. Here she is next to a tomb, and this guy asks her why she's crying. Wouldn't that be obvious, when you're standing by a tomb, that you are crying with sadness over the loss of someone you loved?

The question "Who are you looking for?" makes more sense. When you go into the cemetery office, looking for a grave you want to visit, that's a natural question. You'd be looking for directions to the grave of someone for whom you wanted to pay your respects.

But the questions were wrong. She knew where she was. She was already at the correct grave. She was at the correct grave without the correct body. Mary thought someone had to be playing tricks of some kind.

Jesus knew they were the wrong questions.

Mary didn't answer them. She said, "Sir, if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him."

The Jesus said just one word: "Mary!"

You can imagine the wheels in Mary's head going 'round and clicking into place. She realized that this was Jesus by the way he said her name. That meant Jesus was alive. That meant something even stranger was going on.

She turned and said, "my teacher!"

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And something tells me she laughed. Mary laughed a hysterical I-can't-believe-it laugh. It was laughter combined with tears, helpless I-can't-stop laughter.

The joke was on her.

The joke was on the religious leaders who condemned Jesus.

The joke was on the Romans who put Jesus to death.

The joke was on a selfish and violent world, redeemed by someone who was the opposite of selfishness and violence.

I believe that Jesus laughed right along with Mary Magdalene, because they shared a joke, an experience of survival, an experience of God doing something new. I can hear that laughter ringing down through history.

The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate laughter at death itself.

Martin Luther, the founder of Lutheranism, said: "If you can't laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."

I believe that Jesus is still laughing with us. It is the laughter of amazement, of joy, of the belief that life comes out of death.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 (Contemporary English Version)

1Tell the LORD how thankful you are,
because he is kind and always merciful.

2Let Israel shout, "God is always merciful!"

14My power and my strength come from the LORD, and he has saved me.

15From the tents of God's people come shouts of victory:

"The LORD is powerful! **16**With his mighty arm the LORD wins victories! The LORD is powerful!"

17And so my life is safe, and I will live to tell what the LORD has done.

18He punished me terribly, but he did not let death lay its hands on me.

19Open the gates of justice! I will enter and tell the LORD how thankful I am.

20Here is the gate of the LORD!

Everyone who does right may enter this gate.

21I praise the LORD for answering my prayers and saving me.

22The stone that the builders tossed aside
has now become the most important stone.

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23The LORD has done this, and it is amazing to us.

24This day belongs to the LORD!

Let's celebrate and be glad today.

1On Sunday morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. **2**She ran to Simon Peter and to Jesus' favorite disciple and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb! We don't know where they have put him."

3Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4**They ran side by side, until the other disciple ran faster than Peter and got there first. **5**He bent over and saw the strips of linen cloth lying inside the tomb, but he did not go in.

6When Simon Peter got there, he went into the tomb and saw the strips of cloth. **7**He also saw the piece of cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face. It was rolled up and in a place by itself. **8**The disciple who got there first then went into the tomb, and when he saw it, he believed. **9**At that time Peter and the other disciple did not know that the Scriptures said Jesus would rise to life. **10**So the two of them went back to the other disciples.

11Mary Magdalene stood crying outside the tomb. She was still weeping, when she stooped down **12**and saw two angels inside. They were dressed in white and were sitting where Jesus' body had been. One was at the head and the other was at the foot.

13The angels asked Mary, "Why are you crying?"

She answered, "They have taken away my Lord's body! I don't know where they have put him."

14As soon as Mary said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not know who he was. **15**Jesus asked her, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

She thought he was the gardener and said, "Sir, if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him."

16Then Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to him, "Rabboni." The Aramaic word "Rabboni" means "Teacher."

17Jesus told her, "Don't hold on to me! I have not yet gone to the Father. But tell my disciples that I am going to the one who is my Father and my God, as well as your Father and your God."

18Mary Magdalene then went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord. She also told them what he had said to her. (John 20:1-18, CEV)

Colossians 3:1-4 (Contemporary English Version)

1You have been raised to life with Christ. Now set your heart on what is in heaven, where Christ rules at God's right side.

2Think about what is up there, not about what is here on earth.

3You died, which means that your life is hidden with Christ, who sits beside God.

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4Christ gives meaning to your life, and when he appears, you will also appear with him in glory.

My first job was working in an orange juice factory, but I got canned. I just couldn't concentrate.

Then I worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but I just couldn't hack it, so they gave me the ax.

After that I tried to be a tailor, but I just wasn't suited for it. Mainly because it was a so-so job and seemed more exciting than it was.

Next I tried working in a muffler factory but that was exhausting. I wanted to be a barber, but I just couldn't cut it so we parted.

Then I tried to be a chef -- figured it would add a little spice to my life but I just wasn't at home on the range

Finally, I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it, I couldn't cut the mustard.

My best job was being a musician, but eventually I found I wasn't noteworthy.

Mining was interesting, but then they gave me the shaft.

Next was a job in a shoe factory; I tried but I just didn't fit in.

I became a professional fisherman, but my net income was reel low

Thought about becoming a witch, so I tried that for a spell.

I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining.

I got a job at a zoo feeding giraffes but I was fired because I wasn't up to it.

So then I got a job in a health club, but they said I wasn't fit for the job.

Next, I found being an electrician interesting, but there were too many undercurrents.

After many years of trying to find steady work I finally got a job as a history teacher until I realized there was no future in it.

My last job was working at Starbucks, but I had to quit because it was always the same old grind and the job had no perks. So I retired and I found I am a perfect fit for the job!