

# An Easter Meditation

John 20:1-18

First Presbyterian Church  
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The LORD is Risen!

## The LORD is Risen, Indeed!

The word “never” is overused. And, often, we don’t think when we say it.

Before I had kids, I used to say, “I’m never going to say to my kids the things my father said to me.” After I became an actual father, I sometimes opened my mouth and my father’s words would tumble out, long after he had died, and it was like he was standing next to me, speaking from inside of me, laughing from just behind my shoulder.

When my kids slept late on Saturday, I’d find myself playfully asking, “What are you gonna do, sleep all day?” And when we’d serve something at dinner that they weren’t so sure about, I’d say, “It’ll put hair on your chest.” And when we’d hold hands and pray over that slow food at those family meals, sometimes—*sometimes*—my dad’s prayer would form on my own lips.

*Pardon our sins, O Lord, and make us truly grateful for these and all our many blessings, in Christ’s name we pray. AMEN.*

So much for “never.”

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We throw that word around.

It feels like summer is *never* going to get here. The little boy says, “Gross. I’ll *never* get married.” The teenager says, “I’ll *never* fit in.” The salesman says, “You’ll *never* find a better deal.” You *never* listen to me. I’ll *never* understand. I’m *never* going to eat raw oysters; I said that for years until one late afternoon this fall in a waterfront pub in Baltimore . . .

If we use it without thinking, “Never” can be a word that leaves no room for possibility, no room for surprise, no room for God’s grace.

You can see why Mary Magdalene would be in a “never” frame of mind as she walked to Jesus’ grave. And we don’t hold this against her. We understand. “I’ll *never* get over this pain. I’ll *never* heal from this shock. I’ll *never* feel anything but grief. I’ll *never* be happy. I’m *never* going to see him again.”

And we understand. We understand Mary’s frame of mind.

We’ve been there.

I called Cousin Tom the other day and I got his voice mail. There’s something I love about his message, and it has nothing to do with Tom. At the end of it, you hear Consuelo giggle.

As you know, Cousin Consuelo, Tom's beloved wife, died last month. You prayed for her when she was sick; and you prayed for Tom and the rest of the family upon her sad death. And Rachel and I are grateful. (We leave Wednesday for New Mexico to see him and to inter her ashes.)

We miss Consuelo terribly. And her death confronts us with some hard "nevers." We'll *never* again eat her Mexican cooking. We'll *never* again hug her neck. She'll *never* bust me for my bad Spanish. She'll *never* razz my sons. She won't be around to coax the best out of us. She is not here to boil an argument down to its essentials. She'll *never* make us laugh again.

You understand where I'm coming from.

So does Mary Magdalene.

So do the Ukrainians. So do the Russians, for that matter. So does the rest of the world. The good. The bad. The ugly. We've all carried heavy burdens. We've said "never" before. And, worse, we've believed it.

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Pat Phillips has planted some powerful words in my mind this Lent. She and our Spiritual Formation Team continue to lead us through probing discussions and lots of "aha" learning moments in adult Sunday school. We are growing in our faith because of their inspired teaching.

Pat dusted off Frederick Buechner's words about the resurrection. "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing."

The problem with the word "never" is that insists on inserting a period that is premature. Sometimes the word "never" announces an ending when God intends only a pause.

Mary Magdalene was in an understandable "never" frame of mind. And that's okay. When we are confronted with life's "nevers," a natural reaction is to grieve. She was grieving. She was grieving mightily. Nothing says "never" quite like a cemetery, and the smell of an open grave, and the lonely sound of distant birds.

The resurrection reminds us that our "never" moments are precisely the moments we should pause and ask God, *"Where are you, O God? What's up?"* When we trudge through these "never" moments, this is precisely the time we pray. We inquire from God. We listen for God. We beseech God: *"What are you up to? What would you have us to ponder? How would you have to learn, to grow, to hope? We know in our heads that all is not lost. We know that when you shut a door, you open a window. We know that these ending-moments are, for you, often moments for your grace to abound. But where? How? Open us, O God. Open our eyes."*

Whenever the word "never" is on our lips, these questions and questions like them, perhaps, could be on our mind. *"O God, with you, all things are possible. Where are we to find possibility in these ashes? Where are we to find life from these tombs? Love from this hate? Color from this dark? Hope and healing from this hurt?"*

Clara Scott said it in 1895, and people of faith before and since have joined the chorus. When we are stuck, angry, shocked, hurting, and standing at the edge of "never" we pray—

*Open my eyes, that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Open my eyes, illumine me,  
Spirit divine!*

\* \* \*

I'm not saying we should never say "never." I *am* saying we should think before we speak. Sometimes the word "never" is the perfect word. And this is what Mary Magdalene discovered looking for Jesus' dead body. The words from Jesus and from scripture must have come to her like a wave.

Never will God forsake us. God's love never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end (Lamentation 3:22). Though we may be unfaithful to God, God never breaks God's covenant with us (Judges 2:1). God's deliverance never ends (Isaiah 51:6). God revives parched places, and God's waters never fail (Isaiah 58:11). "I am the bread of life," Jesus said. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). I will not leave you orphaned, Jesus says (John 14). "I am with you always, even to the close of the age" (Matthew 28). God's love *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (I Corinthians 13:4-8).*

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Even in her never-frame-of-mind, Mary came face to face with this never-ending love. Her eyes were opened. Mary was undone at the tomb. 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." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

The word "never" evaporated from her lips, and was replaced by other words, perhaps by the word *Alleluia*. "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." Mary Magdalene learned then what we now know: *Never* are we beyond God's healing touch. For nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Alleluia, indeed.*

The LORD is Risen!

**The LORD is Risen, Indeed!**

John 20:1-18                    1Early 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. 2So she ran and went to Simon 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." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

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

An Affirmation of Faith from Romans 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.