

**A Tale of Two Easters  
John 20:1-18**

**Easter Sunday, 2020  
Port Williams United Baptist Church  
Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.**

Which Easter story is your favorite?

We all have one. Just like we all have our favorite Christmas story. Some of us like the one where the shepherd show up, others prefer the wise men, still others like the little drummer boy, though I doubt that is the choice of any mother who has tried to get a baby to sleep!

As each of the gospel writers set down to write, they drew on different stories, different theologies in deciding what to include. They did the same thing throughout their gospels. Matthew gives us the Sermon on the Mount, while Luke gives us the Sermon on the Plain. Some gospels have Jesus feeding 5,000 and another 4,000 and a couple have him doing both! In Mark Jesus is always on the move, speaking in short Twitter-like burst, while in John Jesus can go on for chapters!

Each gospel writer was telling their story, and my guess is you have a favorite. I know I do.

So which Easter story do you like?

They are different. As the story is told, there are different people showing up at different times; the tomb is either open or shut. Were there angels there, if so inside the tomb or out?

Which Easter story do you like?

Even in our reading from John this morning, there seems to be different stories.

The first has Mary and Peter and John all crowded around the open tomb. They come with all their ideas, their feelings, their faith. But they are all crowded around.

Most of the time that is the Easter we know, isn't it? Easter is one of those days of the year when we all show up! We show up for all kinds of reasons. Some of us because we go to church every Sunday. Some of us because this is the day that our parents, or grandparents make it a requirement if we are going to have any of the special Easter dinner. Others of us come because it is one of those cultural things.

Still others of us come because, because well, there is something in our souls, something that we can't even put a finger on that needs this story, hopes this story might be true. The pain of our lives is so great that we need to hear this story.

And so most years, along with Mary and Peter and John, and maybe the Mary's from the other gospels and Joanna and the other women, the whole crowd—that is how we come to the Easter story.

Maybe it is having all those people around that makes it so special; seeing those people that we might not see again for a while. Maybe it is being in a crowded room that fills our souls. Hearing the majestic music, the song that we only hear this day. It is all of it! All of it, so much of it crowding our sights and hearing, even our bodies! It is the crowd that gives us the sense that we are a part of something so much larger than ourselves, a part of a larger story!

And we need that, don't we? There are times when life is so hard, when the griefs we are carrying, the guilt that is weighing on our souls, the fear that haunts our daytimes as well as our nights—there are times when it is just almost too much. There are times when we need others around us. That is what we are used to, the way Easter is normally experienced.

But this year...

This year we are living the second part of John's story, aren't we. We are told to maintain physical distance, to avoid crowds larger than 4 other people who do not reside inside your home. Luke's Easter crowd would have been ticketed for violating the local ordinance!

This year we need to hear Mary's story because, well, we are living her story.

The few people who had been with her, Peter and John had left—either believing or wondering. Two angels appeared—do they count in the numbering—and ask a question —“Why are you weeping?”

Why are you weeping?

As you come to this this day, that is the question isn't it? It almost seems like a ridiculous question to ask!

Why are we weeping?

Well, where should we start? There is a global pandemic that has sickened hundreds of thousands around the world, has killed so many that medical examiners can't keep up with the death certificates and they are seriously considering temporary mass graves in Central Park in New York City!

Those of us who are not sick are terrified! We are told to stay the blazes home, to maintain 2 meters of social distance, to go out only for necessities like groceries or medicines.

Why are we weeping?

We have watched as millions have lost their jobs in the economic downturn, wondering if we will be next. We have asked ourselves how long we could last, how long we can stretch our pantry. We check our retirement accounts, our bank accounts with a sense of dread.

Why are we weeping?

Schools are closed and we can't see our friends. Birthday parties are held on Zoom and how can you blow out candles that way. Nice, but how do you share cake? For years we

have been told to study hard so we can graduate, and now....now it is postponed maybe indefinitely. End of the year parties, rituals, celebrations all eliminated.

Why are we weeping?

Why are you NOT weeping?

It seems that we are all just on an emotional edge right now, aren't we? Even good news sends us into an unknown emotional frenzy. Thursday afternoon a friend posted a video of one of those virtual choir. Confession, they usually get me, but this time, this time it was a children's choir singing....O Canada!<sup>1</sup> I'm not Canadian, though I want to be! I was an emotional mess!

Weeping seems to be the activity of the month, isn't it? Even if we aren't, our emotions seem to be right here! And it is understandable! We are trying to make sense of an abnormal world. To pretend this is normal, that everything is all right...well that would be dishonest!

Mary was being honest! Her world, her hopes, her dreams, her very life had been disrupted, even destroyed. She was beyond pretending.

In the midst of that, she sees something, someone. Blinded by her tears she can't make him/her out. She pours out her grief to this stranger, like we do to the anonymous online world. *"He is gone and if you just tell me where his body is then I can piece things back together. As horrible as that would be I know the ritual for that, I know what to do. Just tell me how to get back to what is normal!"*

Mary

Mary

And she knew. She knew who he was.

But then came the instruction. It is a language thing. The King James Version translates it as *"Don't touch me."* Others however are closer. Jesus says, *"Don't hold on to me."*<sup>2</sup> Even more, the verb is continuous. Don't hold on to the me you knew in the past, but move on!

She knew the world was never going to be the same! All the assumptions she had about life were gone! All the plans she had for her life were suddenly changed. Everything was going to be different!

Everything is going to be different!

I will confess that like so many of you I have watched the press conferences every day with one question on my mind. When is this going to be over? When will life get back to normal? And Thursday, when Dr. Strang announced that we won't be lifting the restrictions until at least June....my heart just fell!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShYcvPs2gj0&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2eqkgoO17ydIX3d2IWom3NjQkjACuA8bJCHXfEjuLq4OSh1f1cMxXoyn4>

<sup>2</sup>Mary Hinkle Shore. [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3412](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3412)

I so want to be able to gather with you here in the sanctuary for worship. I want to be able to gather for meetings, not to meet, but for the jokes. I want to sit around the table in the nursery on Thursday morning and have Charlie's apples and Elaine's cookies. I want us to be together.

I want that, because it is good and wonderful, but also because that is what I have known. And I want to hold on to that!

At the same time, though, I still hear the email I got several week ago from David Duke asking if this might just be the time when we have an opportunity to dream of what might be! Looking to whenever this is over he wondered:

*Things might go back to the way they were "before" - only those few weeks ago - but only if we let them, and only if we decide that it's desirable that they do. The question I think we should be asking, from parliamentary seats, from news desks, from op-ed pages, and yes, from pulpits, is: was that world of only a few weeks ago-a world of environmental injustice, of the punishing inhumanity and grinding brutality of the gig economy, of the intrusion of technology into every corner of our lives, of the lionization of the billionaire class, the of the demonization of the poor, the different, the "other", and all the rest of it: is that the world that we want to go back to?*

*The behavior prompted by this virus screams one thing loud and clear to me: we don't have to go back to that, not if we don't want to.*

*My point, I guess is this: hopefully we can use this time of enforced inactivity to think about what we might want to do in the next few months. I am conscious that this is a moment of world-historical significance. It's one that will shape our future for decades at least. It's an opportunity for us to be able to shape that future in a way that was unthinkable only weeks ago. I wonder if we will seize it?<sup>3</sup>*

That was the question facing Mary that morning. What are you going to grab hold of Mary? The world you knew, or the new world that is being reborn this morning?

And maybe that is the question facing each of us today. As you hear Jesus call your name, in this new world where the crowds are gone, where it is just you and Jesus, what are you going to grab hold of? Will we just settle for the world we have known, or are we willing to let go and allow God to create something new within and through us.

Mary went and proclaimed the vision she had seen! It took a while, but her vision transformed the world. Might ours do the same?

I pray to God that it will!

Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. David Duke in an email to me in response to a Sermon Talkback conversation at Port Williams United Baptist Church. Used with his permission. David is a professor of history at Acadia University. You can learn more at <https://history.acadiau.ca/Duke.html>.