
The gift of new life
Chapel in the Park United Church
April 5, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:1-18

Before we begin today, I want - I need - to introduce you to some people you already know. I love this sanctuary, but I have always been intrigued that we have some characters who are highlighted - and yet largely hidden. And quite hidden for those of you who sit on the right side of the sanctuary, which for some reason is most of you.

So I need a moment just to lift up our beautiful stained glass figures.

[image: Jesus the fish]

The top image is a fish, which represents Christ, or Christianity as a movement.

[image: Matthew the angel]

Below that, we have Matthew, who is represented by an angel.

[image: mark the lion]

Below that, we have Mark, who is represented by a lion.

[image: luke the calf]

Below that, we have Luke, who is represented by a calf.

[image: John the eagle]

And at the bottom, we have John, who is represented by an Eagle.

[image: four gospels]

This year, I wanted to read the story of the resurrection of Jesus from the gospel of John. Why? Because John was the last gospel to be written down. Mark was the first, and John was the last. And there are perhaps 60-65 years between when Mark was written and when John was written.

And that means that we should expect John to be a bit more well-rounded. It should have a more mature theology. It should use words that we find comforting. If you read through all of the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John you'll know what I mean. But today we can take a shortcut. Because the contrast between the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John is perhaps no more pronounced than in the story of the resurrection of

Jesus.

In Mark the story of the resurrection of Jesus is quite short. Some of the women go to Jesus's tomb with spices. They meet an angel who tells them that Jesus is not there. The angel tells the women to tell the disciples to go meet the risen Jesus in Galilee. The women are filled with both amazement and terror, and they run away afraid. They say nothing to anyone. That is the end of the Gospel of Mark. The women run away from the empty tomb petrified in fear.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus that we just read from the gospel of John is certainly more well-rounded. It has been expanded into enough narrative to create ... maybe not a musical, but at least a decent ballet. In particular, the second part of the story, the part about Mary, is very inviting. The risen Jesus appears to Mary but is not immediately recognized. Jesus is recognized however when he calls Mary by name. In John, Mary is more composed. More brave. And Mary does take a message to the disciples.

So - what do you think of Mary's story?? What do you think of Mary's description of meeting the risen Jesus? How often do you hear a story like that yourself?
[image: Mary magdelene]

Would you be surprised if I told you that I have heard similar stories from many people over the years? Including people from every congregation I have ever been in ministry with.

These stories emerge when I visit with a person who has just lost their spouse. These stories are not all identical, but in the broad strokes the stories follow the same basic pattern.

Here is what the broad story looks like. There is an older married couple who have shared a good life together. They love each other. They care for each other. One of them gets quite ill and after a period of time, they die. About 2 days after the death, the surviving person is visited by their deceased loved one. Sometimes the spouse who has died appears in the bedroom, or perhaps they walk down the hallway in front of the bedroom and only peak in the doorway. If the spouse who has died speaks, they offer short messages of comfort like, "I'm ok", or "I'm waiting for you". These stories happen

at night, usually when the surviving spouse is very sleep deprived. And the spouse honestly has difficulty knowing if the event actually happened, or if it was a dream. But the common thread - and the reality of these stories - is in the message. The message that their loved one is ok. I have heard numerous stories like that since I got into professional ministry. And I always find those stories deeply moving.

To me, Mary's story in John sounds like one of those stories. There is no evidence that Mary and Jesus were married, but there is a lot of evidence that they enjoyed a special, close relationship. I am not surprised that Mary had the experience that John describes. Mary and Jesus clearly loved each other deeply. And Mary has her own experience of interacting with Jesus about 2 days after Jesus's death. The experience of seeing Jesus and hearing his voice once again. And Jesus speaking a short message of comfort.

And like the stories that I have heard from so many people, whether or not the dead person was physically present is not the point of the story. The point of the story is the short, clear message that the person shared. With married couples, the message is often, "I'm ok". But what message did Mary hear?

What Mary heard was Jesus telling her ... "Do not hold on to me".

[image: do not hold on to me]

The message "do not hold on to me" seems unexpected. Mary has been missing Jesus. She has been experiencing strong emotions. She wants to feel his presence again. Her instincts must be to hold on to Jesus. To hold on so that he can never leave again. But Jesus says. "Do not hold on to me".

Why did Jesus say that? "Do not hold on to me"? Mary's reaction was to try to drag Jesus back into the past. She wanted to relive the past few years together again. And that is completely understandable. But does the resurrected Jesus live in the past? Or in the present? The resurrected Jesus does not live in the past.

Resurrection does not mean reliving the past. Resurrection is about new life. The resurrection of Jesus was not about the resuscitation of Jesus's corpse. To reanimate a corpse is to look backwards. The resurrection of Jesus is about the gift of new life. And we cannot find new life if we keep holding on to our past. Jesus would say to us today,

“Do not hold on to me”. The main message of Easter is “Do not hold on to me”. Do not hold on to your past.

[image: resurrection of Jesus’s body]

Now, I’m sure that some of you think that what I just said is wrong. Of course - you say - Easter is all about Jesus’s corpse coming back to life. All the old artwork shows that. And it is certainly the traditional understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. But I feel compelled to remind us all that 2000 years ago, traditional Judaism had no concept of any separation between body and soul. That idea came later from Greek ideas. So if Jesus did appear in a spiritual form, the authors of the gospels would have had no language to write that down. Their only option was to describe a physical appearance.

But instead of debating the language used, let me offer one observation. Suppose that Jesus’s corpse had come back to life. But imagine that the resurrected Jesus had decided to just stay in the tomb. What if Jesus’s body came back to life and Jesus said, “I’ve done my best, over to you”, and hid under the Shroud of Turin until we all went away. The resurrection of Jesus’s body - by itself - would have not accomplished anything. And moreover, not too many weeks after Easter, Jesus body was taken up in to heaven. That event is what we call the ascension. Resurrection has never been about Jesus’s body. The resurrection of Jesus was about his spirit. The resurrection of Jesus is about the continuing spirit of Jesus in our midst.

[image: appreciate what you have]

Have you ever wondered why Jesus’s ministry lasted about 3 years? Wouldn’t 10 years have been better? Couldn’t God have zapped Jesus and he would still be around teaching and healing today? Why only 3 years? And why 2000 years before we had social media and smart phones so that Jesus’s message could reach the entire world? For me, the length of Jesus’s ministry is not important. But it is important to me that his ministry was relatively short. 3 years is not that long. Jesus was present with the disciples. Then, he was not.

And that is a lot like our own lives. We do not know how long we will be sharing space with the people around us. Whether it is the people you love or the people you do not love ... none of us know how long we have together. Doesn’t it just make sense that

we should make the most of every single day? Doesn't it just make sense that we should celebrate the gift that each of us are to each other? There are no guarantees. But today - we have. We have today. We have each other. That we know.

[image: don't let yesterday use up too much of today]

But how often do we let past grudges ruin today. How often do we allow our own unmet expectations to ruin today. How often do we allow our own insecurities from our past to ruin today. How often do we let our uncontrolled anger ruin today. Today we have. Do we want to live in the past or live into the future? Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me". That is a massive clue.

[image: don't ruin today]

Jesus spent 3 days in a tomb. And then he was bright enough to leave. I know many people who have lived in a their own tomb far longer than that. Sometimes for decades. How often do we choose to remain in a tomb of living in the past? How often do we remain in a tomb of resentment, anger, hatred, lack of trust, lack of respect, unmet expectations, or our own need to control everybody? Those tombs can be harder to escape than tombs made of rock.

[image: everyday is new life]

But this is Easter. Easter is a great time to leave those tombs behind and to emerge into new life.

I know it can be hard. Sometimes we stay in our own tombs because we are afraid to leave them. Sometimes we stay in our tombs because there is a stone blocking the door. And we are either unwilling or unable to name and remove that stone. But those stones can be rolled away.

What stones are blocking you, keeping you prisoner in your tomb? What stones are holding you captive? What barriers stand between you and new life? If you don't know where to look, I am always here to help each of us identify and remove the stones that are preventing us from finding new life. Or speak with a friend that you trust.

[image: new bud]

In Jesus's day, not everyone wanted the gift new life that Jesus offered. Today, not everyone wants new life either. But if you do. If you want to move beyond the barriers

that are holding you back. If you want to roll away the stones that stand between you and your own happiness. If you want to be free.

Then Easter awaits. Resurrection awaits. The gift of new life awaits us all. Happy Easter!

Amen.