

Whom Are You Looking For?
Easter Sermon – John 20:1-18
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

He is risen! He is risen indeed! It is so good to be with you all this Easter Sunday and to worship our risen Savior with you. As some of you know I've been fairly sick this week, so much so that I wasn't sure I was going to be able to be here Easter Sunday. I'm thankful to my wife, Amy, who not only nursed me back to health, but also offered to preach if I wasn't up to the task. She said she would just do what I normally do, which is to stand up, say "He is risen," and tell three puns and cry. Is it possible to be too honest in a marriage?

You might think Easter is the easiest day to preach, but actually, I would argue it's the hardest. There's really nothing you can say to add to the power of the resurrection story, no matter how good your puns are. I tried out ten different puns to make the resurrection story better, but no pun in ten did.

Amy and I have recently been watching "Ted Lasso," the Apple TV series about an American football coach hired to lead an English soccer team. While the show contains some salty language – I'm looking at you, Roy Kent – it also has some preachable life lessons on how to handle adversity and deal with criticism. In one episode, Lasso's David-sized team is about to face the Goliath Manchester City. A few fans tell Ted they've already resigned themselves to the loss. When Ted asks why they've done that before the game has even been played, the barkeep Mae chimes in, "It's the hope that kills you." If you dare to have hope, it makes defeat all the more crushing. Life is more bearable if you don't get your hopes up.

I think that's where Mary is this morning. Remember, while he was still alive, Jesus told his disciples, "They're going to kill me, but in three days I'll rise from the dead," and Peter responded, "We're not going to let them kill you!" Incidentally, I think Peter missed the important part of Jesus' message there. So, Mary knew this was going to happen, and yet when she runs back to tell the guys what she found, she doesn't say, "Jesus has been resurrected!" She says, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Don't get your hopes up.

I learned this lesson the hard way the other day. Amy and I were at the Greyline Station Block Party, and there was a guy there with a manual typewriter offering free poems. His sign said give him a word or phrase and about 10 minutes and he'd give you a poem. So, I went over to him and said, "I'm a preacher thinking about my Easter Sunday message. The phrase that's working on me is, 'It's the hope that kills you.' Can you give me a poem on that?" He said, "Sure!" and I thought, "Yes! Someone is going to write my sermon for me."

About – I kid you not – three hours later, this is what he gives me:

"If it is hope that kills you, then what saves? What is the antidote to a poison that flows through all of us? My theory is that is mayonnaise, of all things. You see, life is serious, so serious all the time, endless punches thrown from a man with endless stamina. But if you throw out the word 'mayonnaise' he will stop to think what it could mean. And in that moment, you have him, you have won." The deacons can now collect the offering. Did I mention it was a free poem? I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up.

Mary knew better. I mean, she knew Jesus was dead, she saw him bloodied and beaten, hanging lifeless on the cross. He'd given her so much hope, but she watched her dreams shatter along with his body, her joy washed away with his tears, her song of praise drowned out by his

cries of anguish. Sure, he said he would rise again, but you don't come back from that. Do you? She came to the tomb fully expecting to find Dead Jesus. And she doesn't. Is it OK to get your hopes up?

Notice what happens after all the guys race to the tomb to verify that it was empty. After they leave, there's still one person hanging around. Mary, Now, if she really believed Jesus was dead, why did she go back to the empty tomb? Wouldn't she be too despondent to be reminded his body had been stolen? Instead, she makes her way back there and is the only person to witness the two angels and meet who she assumes to be the gardener. Could it be that this time, she allowed herself to get her hopes up? Resurrection...is it true? You know, Mary, it's the hope that kills you.

But...she came back. She knows he's dead, but she came back. I have to wonder if there was still a glimmer of hope for her. Jesus did say he would rise again, didn't he? And everything he had said to this point was true. Her hopes were 99% crushed, her faith 99% dimmed, but to quote theologian Lloyd Christmas when a girl tells him the odds of her dating him are one in a million, "So, you're saying there's a chance!"

You see, with Jesus, there's always a chance! That's the beauty and the risk of faith, isn't it? Having faith means being vulnerable enough to believe that the guy hanging on the cross a few days ago walked out of a tomb this morning and is still alive today, doing the things he promised us he would do, like loving people others hate and healing people others look down on and reminding us we are not alone as we carry our own crosses. Trusting in Christ means having the audacity to say that not only do you believe the tomb is empty but you're willing to live your life in such a way that testifies to that in where you spend your time and how you share your money and the places in which you exercise your influence. It makes no sense that the tomb was empty this morning, and there are some plausible explanations as to why. But if there's even a 1% chance that the resurrection is true, isn't that worth investing your hope in that?

Maybe not. Maybe life is easier for us if Jesus stays dead. After all, you'd have more control over your life, right? No more mental tug-of-war about how much to pledge or whether or not to get up for Sunday School. If you believe Jesus stayed dead, you can just live your life unencumbered by the pesky call to love your neighbor, completely free from the guilt of living life for yourself, the life, Thoreau said, "of quiet desperation." If Jesus is dead, there's really no reason to have hope, and thank goodness, because it's the hope that kills you.

Before the big football match, Ted Lasso meets with his team and says, "So I've been hearing this phrase y'all got over here that I ain't too crazy about. 'It's the hope that kills you.' Y'all know that? I disagree, you know? I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief. Now, where I'm from, we got a saying too, yeah? A question, actually. 'Do you believe in miracles?' Now, I don't need y'all to answer that question for me... but I do want you to answer that question for yourselves. Right now. Do you believe in miracles?"

Well, that's the question today, isn't it? Another way to ask that, as the gardener asked Mary, is "Whom are you looking for?" Can I just say how much I appreciate Jesus' use of proper grammar here? He was probably a real stickler for the Oxford comma, too. When you came here today, who were you expecting to find? Dead Jesus? That makes the most sense, doesn't it? It's been a tough year, a tough few years, and a lot of things have died – a dream of a better job, a hope for improved health, the strength to face a challenge, the desire for a restored relationship, the longing for deeper faith. So, it's Ok if you came here with your hope-meter at 1%. I get that.

That's the reality of resurrection: in order for it to happen, something has to die. Endings can feel so final, can't they?

But not for Jesus. Remember, he cried out from the cross, "It is finished," not "I am finished." He still had work to do, and through his resurrection we are reminded that God can bring new beginnings out of painful endings. It happens every single day. Someone picks up the phone and says, "I'm sorry." Resurrection. Someone shares a cup of coffee with a potential soulmate. Resurrection. A job opportunity opens up that you never expected. Resurrection. We give Jesus our 1% hope and Jesus gives us...mayonnaise! Nope, still doesn't work. Jesus gives us resurrection. Every single day. Paul says in Romans, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope doesn't not disappoint."

When we leave this place today, there will still be plenty of reasons not to have hope. Jesus is not a magician. But if we have the eyes to see it, resurrection has begun appearing all around us. And our call as followers of Christ is to witness to that new life in how we choose to live. Do we live in fear or by faith? Do we stoke the fires of conflict or do we let our words of peace quench them? Do we look for reasons to criticize and complain – because we know we'll always find them – or do we seek out the positive? Do we choose frustration or understanding? Do we choose despair or hope? If we don't choose hope, then we are effectively trying to put the stone back on the tomb. Cool. Expend as much energy as you want on that particular endeavor. But Jesus isn't in there anymore. It's the lack of hope that kills us.

If you leave this place today and Jesus is still dead for you, then I'm sorry I made you sit through this, because nothing is going to change for you. But if you believe Jesus is alive, if you believe that our God is a God of new beginnings, if you believe resurrection is not a noun describing a past event but a verb describing an ongoing action, then tomorrow should be different than today, because now there's hope. God is opening up tombs all around us, and the things we thought were dead are coming back to life. Maybe you've believed that all your life. Maybe you're believing it for the first time today. Doesn't matter. What matters is that, because of what God did today, you have new life. Something that used to be dead is breathing again. The stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty! Do you believe in miracles?