



Resurrection Eyes

TEXT
John 20:1-10

April 3, 2016 — 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

Upon first hearing my call to ministry, I was working in my home church, little Faith United Presbyterian Church in Monmouth, Illinois. I was an intern the summer before my senior year of college. And I was, for reasons that probably had to do with lack of other options, allowed to preach and teach and pretend like I knew how to be a pastor.

I first felt my call to ministry that summer, and I was surprised, and hesitant, and resistant to it. But I was in the place that first taught me to glue cotton balls to make Easter sheep, that allowed me to use too much glitter at Christmas time and taught me to sing *Jesus Loves Me* — and then taught me not to sing too loud because I wasn't good at it. And those people who had had loved me into the faith affirmed my call when it came, and ultimately encouraged me into seminary.

There was one man in that church who I revered greatly, Dr. Sanford. He was the former pastor of the church, now retired, aging and worshipping with us still on occasion. He was the pastor who had married my parents and first encouraged

them to join the church. He was one of those people who just looked like wisdom, years of knowledge etched into every crease of his face. He was well-respected, and his opinion on the matter of me entering seminary became important to me.

I wanted some encouragement, some wisdom from this wise man. And so I asked one day, trying not to appear desperate, if he had any advice for a person being just called to seminary.

And this revered reverend looked ... kind of past me ... and shook his head slowly. And he said, "Girl, for you to answer a call to ministry now, you must believe in resurrection." And that was all. He just walked away.

I didn't intend to talk to him again, but later that week, he sat on a panel of pastors asked to speak to the presbytery about their calls to ministry, and our church was hosting. He explained how he was called to ministry in the days when people came to church; when offering plates were full, no matter how rotten his sermons were; when people always brought him an extra ham on Easter and cookies on Christmas; when people got married in churches, and didn't

go away to college, and took over their family businesses to remain in town and continued attending their church.

He said, "The world is different now, and you couldn't pay me a million dollars to go into ministry today." Again, not the most encouraging words.

But I realized as he and others spoke that day what he had meant by his strange words that week before. I did believe in resurrection. I must. Anyone who responded to a call to ministry in 2008 at the age of 22, with the economy crashing and our banking system collapsing, must believe in resurrection.

We who had never known the church Dr. Sanford talked about, to whom the glory days of church remain tales we've heard alongside our grandfathers' walk to school in the snow; we who were born into the death of the church, and yet answered the call to serve that church, we must believe in resurrection.

For my story is like many others. I was loved by a church and taught about Jesus. I was a witness to church done well, lives changed and communities built. But despite the beauty of that place that helped me to hear my call, I have also watched

her constantly be in need. Her numbers declined, and her roof began to sag. And I've unfortunately experienced the bats that fly through the hallways she's no longer able to maintain.

The death of the church as she was previously known is not a concept we've read about in provoking online articles. It's something we've always known to be true.

So perhaps my generation's call to ministry is all wrapped up in resurrection — not to be responsible for it, for resurrection is God's work, but to believe in it, to look for it and to proclaim it. Perhaps we *all* are called, in this next chapter of being Church, in these days when 3,500 Christian churches close their doors every year, to be proclaimers of resurrection.

The problem with resurrection is that it's messy. And as Dr. Sanford's tone indicated, it's not work that everyone wants to engage in. From the first day that new life was discovered at the tomb, we've always been a little resistant to resurrection.

And so we go to John today for that first story — that first time new life surprised us in a dead place. It's a story that picks up with a footrace, a case of mistaken identity, some angels and a weeping woman — because resurrection stories are always a little messy.

The story begins as all resurrection stories do: in the dark. Mary Magdalene, one of the most faithful disciples, and yet never named a disciple by our gospel writers or her society, is walking towards the tomb.

She arrives and sees the stone is rolled away. That's all she sees. She sees what she fears seeing. Not resurrection, but robbery.

So the running begins. She runs back to Peter and this other unnamed but beloved disciple, and they return with her to the tomb. They race and see and look inside. The beloved one believes, and they both return home.

But Mary stays. She stays there at the empty tomb, weeping. And as she weeps, she looks into the tomb and sees two angels, dressed in white, and they don't tell Mary anything. They ask her a question: "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Seemingly unbothered by the presence of heavenly messengers, Mary states her problem, "They've taken the body of my Lord, and I don't know where to find him."

As she says it, another person appears behind her, outside the tomb. Again, she is asked the same question: "Woman, why are you weeping?"

She believes this person to be the gardener, and tells him, "Sir, if you've taken him, tell me so I can go and get his body."

So it's clear at this point that Mary is overcome by her grief, by things not being as she expects them to be. She expected to see Jesus in the tomb. She perhaps expected that Peter and the other disciple would help her when she called on them. But here she is, alone and weeping, unsurprised by angels and challenging the supposed gardener.

And so the gardener says her name. And she realizes she's

found the body of her Lord — alive and well, standing before her. She does what we'd expect her to do: She grabs onto him, not wanting to lose her Lord yet again. But Jesus tells her not to. He's about to go again, this time to God, and he tells her, "Do not hold onto me ... go and tell them, I am ascending."

And so Mary does. Mary goes and preaches the first sermon ever preached. "I have seen the Lord."

Missed communication and unsurprising angels, lots of running and believing and not understanding: Resurrection is never clean and orderly and predictable. It asks us more questions than giving us answers, and leaves few believing until they can see.

Resurrection is difficult — not for the God who does it, but for those who find it. Because to claim resurrection is to acknowledge that Jesus is not in the tomb anymore, and therefore we might not know where to find him. To claim resurrection is to admit we might not recognize him when we see him. To claim resurrection is to stop crying for what was and see what is right in front of us. Resurrection means that Jesus is out, and loose, and that we cannot control where he goes. And this can be a scary thing when the body of Christ has prized decency and order over resurrection messiness.

This whole story could have been much less messy. Jesus could have stayed in the tomb until Mary showed up that day. He could have been where she

expected him to be and explained what was to happen. But resurrection doesn't wait for us. It always goes ahead of us — into Galilee, to the ascension, into the cities and streets that need the body of Christ. And so I believe that our call to ministry together in this next era of church is to go out and find that Jesus, wherever he is, and proclaim resurrection when we see him.

The signs of new life are everywhere, if we're willing to jump into the mess and have eyes to see. It was evident in my last call, where our youth programs quadrupled and our congregation experienced resurrection by opening its campus every Friday night to kids in the community by providing cheap pizza and fun games, with prayer and a promise to listen and to love — youth of every color and every economic background who found their way into community and then into worship on Sundays, leading us with electric guitars and melodies our choir couldn't sing.

It is evident in a man named John, who is HIV positive and living on assisted income, who spends every dime he has (and some he doesn't) to buy groceries for the recently migrated family who live next to him — and for bus passes to visit people in jail and pay for proper burials for those who died homeless and alone. This is a man who has little and should have given up some time ago, but who continued on in the footsteps of the Resurrected One in the messiest places.

It was evident in my underground ministry group in Miami that shared a love of beer and Jesus — and combined the two by gathering in Miami's breweries, who after a while were recognized and began to be asked for prayer by bartenders and comedians and all the types who come to breweries but not to churches.

It is evident now in this little neighborhood where we decided to rent a house here in Kansas City — a neighborhood you've heard about if you follow me on Facebook, where drive-by shootings are not impossible and shell casings are found on our morning walks. But it has also been known lately for street football games, where neighborhood kids and college students have been playing together in these spring evenings, and all are moving towards a future different than the one written by the city for the communities east of Troost in the past.

The signs of resurrection are everywhere. And I acknowledge that it is easier to walk away before the resurrection is fully known. It is easier to weep and lament for what was. It is easy to miss the spring night football games out of fear and stay inside — for we've always been a little resistant to the mess of resurrection.

My last congregation experienced growth and energy through the new young people who called her their church home, but there were some who scoffed and complained and lamented that these kids and their ideas about equality and free-

dom and love were going to ruin the church; who feared that the influx of new people meant the loss of power from the old; who called the changes bad and ran from the tomb, preferring to remain locked inside rather than encounter a body that looked different.

And my prophet, John, who gave all he had for those around him, was held at arm's length by his church, whom he made uncomfortable; who wasn't quite sure what to do with the man who lived the life they preached. And they continually refused him and gossiped about him — and missed the opportunity to be the body with him to those who so needed new life.

And when some people found out about that brewery group, that we intentionally called underground so no one would find out about it, that we served Miami's loneliest and most in need, they were furious we dared to take the holy into an unholy place. The scandal of Jesus escaping his tomb was just too much.

You see, the dying is easy. We've nailed that (pardon the pun). And the resurrection is easy because it's God's doing and not ours. But seeing it, and naming it, and proclaiming it, is hard. Seeing it and proclaiming it acknowledges that this Jesus doesn't fit into our nice little box anymore; that he might exist in new places, doing unfamiliar things in unrecognizable ways. And it can be scary and messy to let Jesus out of his box.

My generation only knows a Jesus that lives outside the box.

He escaped years ago, perhaps when the church was fighting with herself about whether or not women should be able to preach — or more recently, when we had the same conversation about our LGBT friends. So perhaps our reputation for looking for life in unconventional places is not an intentional choice on our part, but the only reality we've known.

Jesus is alive and all over the place. He's in the kids that look different, and in the people who do crazy things for life, and in the messiness of breweries and bars and segregated neighborhoods. He's not going back into the box. The Church of tomorrow must decide if she wants to be part of this body that looks different now — or if she wants to keep searching for what she knew; crying for what was; and denying the signs of life in front of her.

I am glad to be called to this church in particular because I think you made this decision some years ago. I think you decided you'd have eyes for resurrection and work towards finding and claiming this new body. I think you decided to join the risen Christ here and be part of all the new she is doing.

You built a coffee shop and preschool instead of a bigger box, and you've committed to a ministry for young people who are finding the Resurrected One in untraditional ways.

I'm not sure you've named it as this. I'm not sure you've understood your vision to be one of resurrection. But if you haven't, I'll name it for you as

Dr. Sanford first did for me. You must believe in resurrection. You've pointed to the resurrected Christ, alive and well and different today. So when the story gets strange, or the body begins to look too much like the gardener, or the weeping from the rest of the church becomes louder than your proclamation, I'm asking you to proclaim it anyway.

For there are moments and times today that feel quite dark. Division in our country and in the Church is greater than it's been in my lifetime. There seems to be no bridle on hateful rhetoric. There are wars we can't get out of and wars that can't get out of us. There are security issues that loom, and too many guns that threaten, and schools that fail. The days feel dark.

And it's always in the dark that resurrection begins.

We need more people with eyes for resurrection, and the world needs this church to be one that proclaims resurrection. There are signs of new life everywhere. Stones are rolling away. Have eyes to see them, and point to them when you notice. Proclaim them from your rooftops and social media pages. Be willing to be part of the mess, for there is new life there if you do.

I believe in resurrection. Do you?

Prayer: Living God, your rising made you easier to find, but harder to predict — for you show up everywhere, even to us, but rarely on our schedule or

in ways we expect. Living God, help us to not resist the new life we see, even when it's messy. Help us to point to it and proclaim it and always be people who rejoice in resurrection. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.