



The Stranger You Have Always Known

TEXT
John 20:1–18

April 16, 2017 — Easter Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It's resurrection day. Resurrection is good news. But just how good it is might depend on how good you feel about your life.

When I was younger — a college student — I wanted to be important. I never said it that way, or my mother would have told me to wash my mouth out with soap. What I said was, I wanted to make a difference. I had enough of my life ahead of me at the time that it seemed a reasonable goal.

I grew out of that. A bit later, I just wanted to be happy. I never said it just that way either, or my mother would have told me I should think about something other than myself. But being happy had proved to be more challenging than I thought, so it seemed like a worthy goal, for a while.

And then I wanted to be fulfilled. That's a lot like being happy, but it sounds better, so you get less correction from your mother. Does any of this sound familiar, or is this my particular form of crazy?

More recently, I just want to do what I am supposed to do. One thing I have learned is that I never reached importance or meaning or faithfulness to the extent that I wanted. And if you

asked me, "How good do you feel about your life?" it might be a mixed report. I am blessed beyond counting, but my stewardship of life's blessings is a mixed report.

I wonder if you might feel the same. We are all a work in progress.

Resurrection is about that as much as it is about death. It's about death, but it is also about how often we fail to live. As we say here at Village, there is a lot of beauty in this world, but the world is also broken.

I understand that the most frequently read article in the *New York Times* in 2016 was titled "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person."¹ It was written by Alain de Botton. He says we are all complex human beings, who only look completely normal to those who do not know us very well. He suggests a more fruitful approach to the first date is not to try to impress one another with how wonderful we are, but rather to explore a more honest self-reveal. He suggests something like, "I'm crazy like this ... how are you crazy?"

Well if that is your lead, I don't know if there will be a second date, but I think I get why so many people read

his article. We know we are a mixed report: beautiful but also broken.

Resurrection is about death, but it is also about the failure to live. Resurrection is God's ultimate work of love, and God's love is persistent. Resurrection is God's response to that which is broken in us and in the world.

Mary didn't recognize the risen Jesus ... not at first. She thought she was talking to a stranger. Some have said with her eyes blurry from weeping, she couldn't see him clearly. Maybe. But others also had trouble recognizing the resurrected Jesus. Luke tells us that Cleopas and his friend walked with Jesus all afternoon on their way to Emmaus, and they didn't recognize him. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, says that one of the strangest features of the resurrection appearances is they began as an "encounter with a stranger."² There was something different about him.

Mary was there early in the morning, while it was still dark. She couldn't sleep; she was restless.³ She had been there on Friday, in the crowds, watching his agony. And now, haunted by all she had lost and

by what she could not forget, she was unable to sleep. She loved him, and his death broke her heart.

But I imagine she grieved more than the loss of a loved one. She, like many others, had hoped that Jesus, who had changed them, would change the world. She hoped that Jesus would make the world more gracious, more mature, more just. But on Friday, she stood there in the crowds, as the government had used the *mother of all punishments*: crucifixion.⁴ And hatred won again. Fear won again. Violence won again. Humanity lost again. She grieved because she knew that this world would always be a world of crucifixion. We can't escape that.

We see it all the time: Syria and Isis; bombs exploding in Egyptian churches; tensions escalating between the U.S. and North Korea, with millions of lives at risk, but none of them the deciders; shootings in night clubs; the coral reefs bleaching. We are a mixed bag, and it is killing us. There is much to grieve.

So before sunrise, she carries her broken heart to the tomb. Who knows why she thought that would help; sometimes it's just the place you need to be. But when Jesus speaks to her, she thinks he's the gardener. She didn't recognize him. Some say the shock of it was so strong, of course, she didn't recognize him. That makes sense. But the truth is I have experienced the reverse more often. I have known many

with broken hearts, carrying fresh grief, who have been certain they have seen their loved one again. I would find it just as reasonable had Mary stumbled upon the gardener and thought it was Jesus.

I think she didn't recognize him, not because of what was going on in her, but because there was something different about him. I think resurrection changes us. The fact that resurrection changes us is the best news.

Dr. Victor Dzau is the President of the National Academy of Medicine. The Academy has launched what they call the "Grand Challenge for Healthy Longevity."⁵ It is research into how to extend the human life span while keeping bad knees and hearing loss, not to mention weak hearts, from eroding quality of life. They aren't just contemplating a few years. The boldest among them are asking, "Can science make death optional?"

There was a fundraiser last month outside of Los Angeles.⁶ It was held in Norman Lear's living room — I assume a room identical to my living room. Sergey Brin and Larry Page were there. They are the co-founders of Google. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, was there. Like the rich man who came to Jesus asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the room was jammed with powerful folks and Hollywood glitterati wanting to learn from the scientists the secrets of healthy longevity. Tuxedoed servers circled the room with

delicious finger foods, but no one was eating the Moroccan phyllo chicken puffs. Goldie Hawn asked about glutathione. It's an antioxidant that protects mitochondria. Some call it the "God molecule." I used to know what mitochondria were.

Dr. Joon Yun, who runs a health care hedge fund, stated that aging is like a code in the human genome. The code can be hacked, he told an enthusiastic crowd. We can end aging.

Dr. Aubrey De Grey, the Chief Science Officer of a Silicon Valley research foundation, asserts we can retool our biology and stay in our bodies forever. De Grey is 53 and doesn't expect to live long enough to witness this step toward immortality, so he has left instructions to be frozen in liquid nitrogen and thawed when the technology to achieve immortality is available.

I don't know how that strikes you, but I've got to say, this sounds like a terrible idea to me. Just because we can doesn't mean we always should. I'm all for extending life span a bit, but the idea of making death optional is terrifically foolish. And I can't think of anything more egocentric than to assume what the world needs now is more of me.

Now you might reasonably point out that it's an odd day for a preacher to speak disparagingly of eternal life. I mean, after all, isn't Easter about eternal life? Isn't Easter about defeating death? And wouldn't God celebrate it if science were

able to defeat this enemy of humanity?

No ... no to all of that. Easter is not about eternal life. Eternal life is not big enough.

Do you remember the story of Adam and Eve? The story of Adam and Eve names the two big problems for human living. The first problem is that humans are finite. We are limited. We have a beginning, and we have an end. All creatures die. It's true of monarch butterflies, of stars in the sky, of great whales in the sea and even of the earth itself. There was a beginning, and there will be an end. We die.

The National Academy of Medicine is dreaming of changing that limited reality. And maybe they will. And if successful, it could be fantastic news — except that death is not our biggest problem. The other problem named in the story of Adam and Eve is the problem of sin. That's not a word that carries much meaning for us these days — and rightly so. But think of sin this way. It's our constant tendency to mess stuff up, even the stuff we care about. The truth is we are all a mixture of beauty and brokenness. And when we come to our end, the life we offer to God is always a mixed bag ... our own form of crazy. You might be perfect on the first date, but with those who know us, the truth is more complicated.

Resurrection is not just about eternal life; it's about our best life.

As much as anyone, Joe Moll taught me this. Joe was small, quiet and the strongest man I know. He looked 15 years

older than he was, as he did his best to destroy himself with alcohol. But he dried up, and he ran Tradition House, a halfway house run by the church I served in Jacksonville. On any given night, there were 24 men living in that suburban house fighting to put their lives back together. Many of them failed.

But every day, Joe was there — teaching, caring, loving these men into a new tomorrow. I asked him what kept him going. He said, “Tom, you have to trust that there is a better man buried down in each one of these men, and it will require a persistent love to bring that better man to life.”

Resurrection not only defeats death; it defeats our failure to live. There is a better self that we, on our best days, endeavor to bring to life. With grace and discipline, we have measured success at that in this world.

But I imagine death will catch us, and we will still be a mixed bag — some beauty and brokenness. But resurrection will change us. Because resurrection is not some magic trick; it is God's ultimate work of love. Resurrection will change us and bring our best self to full fruition. Resurrection is not just about eternal life; it's about your best life.

When we are there, we will recognize one another, but I imagine it might take just a minute.

¹The article can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sun->

[day/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0](http://www.villagepres.org/day/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0)

²Williams, *Resurrection* (1982/2004), p. 75

³I am indebted to Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin for her interpretation of Mary being restless.

⁴Again, Rev. McLaughlin

⁵Information can be found here: <https://nam.edu/initiatives/grand-challenges-in-health-and-medicine/longevity-grand-challenge-prizes-awards/>

⁶The details of this gathering are shared in Tad Friend's article in *The New Yorker*, “Silicon Valley's Quest to Live Forever,” April 3, 2017.

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 website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.