

*About women, no one can know. There are some,
Like this one, whose pain is a locked sepulcher;
Their pain is buried in them, there is no fleeing
From it and no casting it off . . .
. . . Deep calls unto deep, a grave for a grave,
A carcass drawing towards a carcass in that unhappy
morning;
Three days was this one in a grave, in a world that died
In the cry in the afternoon. It is finished,
The cry that drew blood from her like the barb of a sword.
It is finished. Finished. Mary fell from the hill
To the emptiness of the last Easter . . .
A world without a living Christ, the horrifying Sabbath of creation,
The abyss of the hundred thousand centuries and their end,
Mary lay down in the grave of the trembling universe.
. . . All the flowers of memory withered except the rain of
Blood
. . . God was extinguished,
In the dying together, in the burying together . . .*

Saunders Lewis, "Mary Magdalene"

The Announcer

John 20:1-18

The Rev. Dr. Rodney Wallace Kennedy

This is the best possible of all days to be in church. In all honesty, a preacher loves a big crowd, but this is the hardest Sunday to preach. Preachers want to preach the perfect sermon, so we try too hard. The best advice I've ever had about preaching on Easter: Try not to get in the way of the story. The gospels put all their Easter eggs in the resurrection basket. Somehow death is dead. Resurrection is the second "Big Bang". The divine power that brought cosmos from chaos has brought a dead one to life again. As one scientist puts it, "It is the fire in the equations." This is the most glorious news in the world, and on this Sunday, we are all pretty much on the same page. I am especially grateful that you chose to be in church on Easter Sunday. Thank you for being here!

There are two worlds in our gospel text: a Good Friday world and an Easter world.

THERE IS A GOOD FRIDAY WORLD. The results of Good Friday still cover the skies in the pre-dawn, still-dark, walk of Mary to the graveyard. And **in the dark**, cynicism has tried to murder hope. Yet hope lies heavy in the heart of Mary clinging to life by some rationale she can't explain, but "**Mary came to the tomb.**" This is the slender thread of what's left of hope.

All the human hurt, grief, pain, failure, and disappointment in the world pile on hope – nailing it to a cross, driving it into the exile of Sheol, backhoeing a huge boulder over the entrance, and placing guards to make sure it never returns. The calendar says that it is Easter Sunday, but in Mary's heart it is still Good Friday.

Mary has died a thousand deaths during these three days – the death of the sense of being valued, being loved, being given a place.

Mary Oliver writes, "The last prayer had been said and it was time to turn away from the casket And then I heard a noise that seemed not to be human. It was more like wind among leafless trees I paused with one hand on the roof of the car, while the sound rose in pitch, then cohered into language:**No, don't do this to me! No, no . . . !** (Jane Kenyon, "No," *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*).

There is nothing more numbing than the loss of hope. Mary sees, but doesn't understand, the empty tomb. For her the empty tomb is an occasion for blame not blessing: "**They** have taken the Lord out of the tomb." A Good Friday world inhabited by the nebulous tribe of THEY – the modern demons that first century people thought lived in the trees, streams, lakes, rocks, and plants, and in them. "They" are the purveyors of blindness, lameness, ignorance. They suck the life from us like those horrible Death Eaters in Harry Potter. St. Paul labels them the powers and the principalities. I think we are far too casual about the systemic power of evil to wreak havoc with all our lives.

A Good Friday world is filled with **stones**. The world of “They” loves stones. With sticks, stones, and swords “They” put to death the followers of Jesus. Stones are for burying. Stones are for killing. Stones are for walls. The Good Friday world is a stone-cold world. Stones represent the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day. Darkness, stones, THEY – a Good Friday world.

Then, dimly, at the border between the world of Good Friday and the world of Easter we see **a stranger**. Mary thinks he is the gardener but he is the guide to a new world. The resurrection stories often make Jesus a stranger – unrecognizable. Easter begins in shadows with a stranger. In the resurrection, Mary must begin again as if she had never known Jesus. If we have been too casual about the disaster of a Good Friday world, we have been too casual by far, too easy, too familiar with our understanding of how much we know of Jesus and how close we are to him. For some, their experience of Jesus is more that of a gardener than the God of creation and redemption.

Suddenly, knowing Jesus is an ongoing dialogue with one who evades our surface desires and surface needs, and will not give in to the tyrant of our little private dramas. We have to keep turning again and again in our confrontation with a person who judges and calls and recreates. This is the work of a lifetime and one doesn’t become familiar with Jesus by making a profession of faith at age seven, singing praise songs on Sunday, or getting dressed up for Easter worship. Christ, the wisdom of God, is not a piece of angel food cake. The gospel is not simple. The gospel is not easy. The gospel is not superficial. And don’t leave out the gospel is not sentimental. As soon as we think we have this all figured out, that we are walking in sunshine, attaining something close to perfection, we should cry with St. Paul: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Easter demands so much of us. We must wrestle constantly with layers of meanings, with symbols, with persons, and with the call of Jesus upon our daily lives. “Jesus grants us a solid identity, yet refuses us the power to finalize it, and obliges us to realize that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him in the world of unredeemed relationships; to imagine that we have done with desire and restlessness, is to slip back into that unredeemed world; to turn from the void of the tomb to the drama of a cheapened Calvary for the frustrated ego” (Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*).

The resurrection opens up immense horizons and the journey of faith will take more years than we have in this world, but Jesus has given us eternity. He has also given us companions because he turns “they” into “us.” Many country churches sit in the midst of the community cemetery so that you enter the church by walking among the saints, thus giving visual memory of the communion of saints.

The movement from horizon to horizon means endless practice, devotion, and giving of the self to the art of living resurrected lives. "Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part with all thy art."

There are horizons beyond our limitations and the resurrection is the door to these horizons. There are universes of meaning stacked on universes of meaning and most of us are still in kindergarten trying to shove square sticks into round holes. The empty tomb is the door to the horizons of Easter. When Jesus calls out, "Mary," he does more than say her name. He gives her back her lost meaning, value, and significance. The sound of her name on the lips of Jesus was like the sound of music to her ears. Suddenly the mountains are alive with the sound of music. Even more, Jesus invites Mary into the journey beyond the limited horizons of a Good Friday world. And this is why Easter can't just be a one Sunday stopover – but the journey of a lifetime stumbling upon horizons upon horizons each one more glorious, magnificent, and stimulating than the one before.

There is an Easter world: The words come tumbling out. Beauty now for ashes wear / Perfumes for the garbs of woe / Dances for sad footsteps slow / Open wide your hearts that they / Let in joy this Easter Day. / Upon Christ throw all away: Know ye, this is Easter Day.

A novelist wrote an imaginary story of Jesus encountering Judas after the resurrection.

Judas says "If Hell's really waiting, I'll fry in Hell."

Jesus says, "You won't" and this new certainty lights his face in the best old way and a whole new one.

Judas says, "How'll I escape it then?"

Jesus says "Because I'm now the proprietor of Hell – Hell and Earth and all the rest. I think I'm somehow assured of that now."

As John Updike puts it: "Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence; making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the door."

Margaret Edson's play, Wit, begins with Vivian Bearing, fifty-year-old English scholar, specializing in the poetry of John Donne, talking to the audience: she is currently a patient in a major research hospital undergoing treatment for advanced ovarian cancer, and she knows the prognosis is not good. "The Faerie Queene this is not," she advises, alluding to Edmund Spenser's poem, a tribute to the glory of Queen Elizabeth and her virtues. As she dies, having learned much about life, Vivian is at peace with herself and her mortality. In the final scene, the lights go out and then a spot comes up on Vivian, standing naked and unashamed and lifting her hands toward heaven--a powerful icon of

resurrection. Bodily resurrection without any gnostic trappings – just fully alive human beings! This is our Easter hope!

My first college major was Radio and Television Broadcasting. I wanted to be an announcer. Even as a teenager, I would turn off the sound of a ballgame and do the play by play. One day I realized that as a preacher I was already an announcer. Like Mary, I was called to announce the resurrection. The word “announce,” in the Greek text is the official church word for preaching. I am a preacher, an announcer of good news.

So let me announce: In the Easter world stones are rolled away, walls come tumbling down, and hearts of stone are melted into the passion and ecstasy of love. A Far Side cartoon shows two Roman soldiers guarding the entrance to a grave and the stone has been rolled away. One soldier rolls over on his side and asks in a sleepy voice, “Waddya mean? That wasn’t you who just said, ‘Good morning’?”

In an Easter world we are ten times the people we were in a Good Friday world. Resurrection changes everything. The evidence of resurrection in the life of the early church – well, that’s irrefutable. Their enthusiasm shook the powers of a Good Friday world.

You may not expect much of this place and you may not have much confidence in our ability to be the church for you. But having come here, you have an opportunity to encounter the stranger who wishes to become your companion on the journey from the world of Good Friday into the unending horizons of the Easter world. Brothers and sisters, I offer you Jesus Christ, once dead, now alive, standing at the door to the horizons of an Easter world. I beg you to walk through the door.