

## “See Mary Run, Run Mary Run”

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Text: John 20:1-18

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Do we have any runners here this morning? Any joggers? We all know running is great exercise – it’s good for the cardiovascular system – it can help keep weight off, and is an excellent stress reducer. Former President Jimmy Carter once said that “Everyone who has run knows that its most important value is in removing tension and allowing a release from whatever other cares the day may bring.” Charles Schultz, the late *Peanuts* creator, observed, “Jogging is very beneficial. It’s good for your legs and your feet. It’s also very good for the ground. It makes it feel needed.”

Now some of us are runners. Some of us aren’t. I’m a walker, not a runner. I sort of like what another Neil had to say about running. Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, once told Walter Cronkite: “I believe the Good Lord gave us a finite number of heartbeats and I’m not going to use up mine running up and down a street.” Maybe the non-runners among us would agree with the man who declared, “I don’t jog. If I die I want to be sick.” Or how about the late great Erma Bombeck, who stated, “The only reason I would take up jogging is so that I could hear heavy breathing again.”

When was the last time you ran somewhere? For me, it was about two weeks ago – Marian, Sonny and I were in the church office that morning and we heard a loud crash – I ran out the door to discover a car accident at the entrance of our parking lot. When was the last time any of you ran anywhere? Unless I’m mistaken it wasn’t this morning as you arrived for worship. Some of you walked to church – some of you came in a vehicle, but I didn’t see anyone running. None of us ran toward Easter, which is curious, because according to John’s Easter Gospel, there was a great deal of dashing about on the first Easter.

John tells us that Mary Magdalene was the first on the scene. She discovered that the stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was empty. So her reaction? She ran. At this point, she didn’t know what was happening, but she knew she had to run and tell the disciples that the body of Jesus had disappeared. Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried and now someone had taken His body. In her grief, Mary ran. Mary told Peter and the beloved disciple – assumed to be John – the news and they immediately put on their running sandals. Mary ran away from the tomb, but these guys ran toward it.

The scripture tells us they started out running together, but that the beloved disciple – John – got to the tomb before Peter. Was the other disciple simply faster than Peter, or did Peter sort of hold back just a little wanting to get there but afraid of what he would find? These were two of the three inner circle disciples – why didn’t they try to stay together as they ran? Did John keep turning around to yell, “C’mon Peter, pick, up the pace.” Or did Peter exhort John to slow down so he could keep up? What did they think they were running toward? Did they run as rivals, as one scholar suggests? Peter was the leader of the disciples in John’s gospel, always ready with a quick answer. But the beloved disciple seemed closest to the heart of Jesus. Maybe they ran to see which one of them would get there first. Maybe they sensed some new, strange, yet exciting future was waiting for them and they wanted to be the very first in line. We sometimes run toward that which we don’t know or don’t understand. We run toward good news and bad news. We run because we want to know if the news is for us.

These two sprinting disciples came to Jesus’ tomb not knowing, running toward something new – some strange event which they instinctively knew meant a change in their world. The beloved disciple made it to the tomb ahead of Peter, peered into the empty tomb, and believed. According to the scriptures, the beloved disciple was the first to believe in Easter.

Perhaps the gospel writer John not only wanted to tell us that the beloved disciple got there first, but also the way he got there. Others came to Easter in different ways. Mary will not believe until she stands face to face with the risen Christ and hears Him call her name. Thomas doesn’t believe until the risen Christ offers to let Thomas touch His pierced hands and wounded side. But the beloved disciple comes to Easter another way. He believes without seeing. He doesn’t hear Jesus. He doesn’t see the risen Christ. All he does is come, peer into the dark, empty tomb and he believes. Unlike the others, he believes in the resurrection in the light of Jesus’ absence. The very first believer in the resurrection, the first to believe in the triumph of God, came there by the same path that you and I do, by not seeing the risen Christ. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says. He’s talking to us and about us.

So if we are those who believe without seeing, we are also those who have reason to run toward Easter. By the light of that Easter morning we can, just like Mary and the disciples, read through the darkness a “yes but” kind of answer.

Yes, hate kills, but love ultimately never dies, never dies with God, never even with us. Love is stronger than death. So what we can proclaim this morning is that all the tenderness and strength, all the beauty and goodness that on Good Friday we saw stretched out on a cross, all that goodness incarnate is once again alive. We must remember, however, that there’s nothing sentimental about Easter. Resurrection is a demand as well as a promise. Easter is a demand not for sympathy with the crucified Christ, but a demand for loyalty to the resurrected one.

It is a travesty that so often Christians show sympathy for their crucified Christ and at the same time continued loyalty to the institutions that crucified him. Easter, then, is the day to break that loyalty, to say there can be no sympathy without a changed loyalty. The new loyalty must be that of Peter after Jesus’ death, the loyalty that made him ten times the person he was before; the same loyalty that made Stephen under the rain of death-dealing stones cry out, Christlike, “Father, forgive”; the loyalty of other martyrs who with their blood watered the seed of the church until it became the acorn that broke the mighty boulder that was the Roman Empire.

I mentioned before that there used to be an annual sunrise service on the rim of the Grand Canyon. As the scripture line was read from Matthew, “an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone,” a giant boulder was heaved over the rim. As it went crashing down the side of the Canyon, thousands of feet below into the Colorado River, a two-thousand-voice choir burst into the “Hallelujah Chorus.” Too dramatic? Not if we live in an Easter, not a Good Friday world.

The Easter message of resurrection also proclaims that we are no longer tied to our sin. Human beings are never finished products. We are not perfected because we are not perfectible. Those who think we are simply show how little they’ve tried to live out their convictions. It’s healthy, it’s a sign of freedom, to feel guilt about our failures as parents, or as children, or as spouses, or as members of a church or community, or as citizens of our nation and world. The only thing that is unhealthy is our failure to believe that there is more mercy in God than sin in us. So let us live not as sinners, but as forgiven sinners – and what a world of difference there is. Now we can live gratefully, joyfully, not as permanently defeated folk whose repentance has drained all the joy out of their hearts, not to mention the iron out of their spines. Let us give that boulder in the Grand Canyon a second meaning. Let it stand for the burden of guilt which, in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian carries on his breaking back up the hill until at last he reaches the cross. There it falls off, and rolls down the hill faster and faster until it disappears into the empty tomb. Isn’t that a wonderful image? Part of the joy of this morning is knowing how much baggage and guilt and sin and pain we can leave in the tomb.

That’s why we can run toward the tomb, for we know what we leave buried there. But we can also run after we’ve seen the tomb, for we know that the risen Christ lives to help us complete our incompleteness. What incompletes are keeping us from growing into the fullness of faith and the life God has purposed for us? Is it a relational incomplete? Do we have unresolved conflicts with someone, or feelings that haven’t been expressed? Do we have trouble with integrity – with keeping agreements, or being truthful? Maybe we have personal incompletes – may be we avoid dreaming like we once did, especially dreaming that impossible dream that once set us on fire. Or is our incompleteness a spiritual one – that we’d like to commit 100 percent to God yet we fail to follow a disciplined walk with Christ through daily prayer and Bible reading?

Having believed without seeing, we can run with the assurance of God’s promise to transform our incompletes into completes. The empty tomb reminds us that we ourselves are reborn with the risen Christ. We are reborn to run and seek out this Christ who once again lives in and through us.

In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest tells the woman sitting on the bench next to him of when he was a little boy and how he literally broke out of his leg braces. He says, “Now you wouldn’t believe it if I told you, but I could run like the wind blows. From that day, if I was going somewhere, I was runnin’.” A man who sees him shoot by says, “That boy sure is a running fool.”

Anyone here ready to race me to the tomb? Be careful you may break free from something, and someone may call you a runnin’ fool for Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: We have not seen it. We have no proof of it. But yet we believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and that you give us new life – today – right now. Quicken our pace. Enrich our joy. Amen.

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