

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, April 20, 2014
Easter Sunday**

LOOKING FOR CHRIST

John 20:1-18

By the accounting of some critics, the most important play of the 20th century was Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Have any of you ever read it or seen it? A few people. Beckett was an Irishman who was on several occasions asked about his own religious views and refused to answer. *Waiting for Godot* is his masterpiece. It perfectly encapsulates the despair, the disgust, the hopelessness of the 20th century. It's an absurdist play and it's about two men – Vladimir and Estragon – who are waiting for the mysterious Godot. It includes dialogue like this, which is from the first act:

Estragon says, "Charming spot, inspiring prospects. Let's go."

Vladimir says, "We can't."

"Why not?"

"We're waiting for Godot."

"Ah. Are you sure it was here?"

"What?"

"That we were to wait."

"He said, 'By the tree.' Do you see any others?"

"What is it?"

"I don't know. A willow, I think."

"Where are the leaves?"

"It must be dead. No more weeping. Or perhaps it's not the season."

Estragon says, "It looks to me more like a bush, a shrub, a bush."

"Were you insinuating that we have come to the wrong place? He should be here. He didn't say for sure he'd come. And if he doesn't come, we'll come back tomorrow."

"And then the day after that?"

“Possibly. And so on. The point is until he comes.”

“You’re merciless. We came here yesterday.”

“No, there you’re mistaken.”

“What did we do yesterday?”

“What did we do yesterday? Why, nothing is certain when you’re about. In my opinion we were here.”

“Do you recognize the place?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, that makes no difference.”

And the truth of the matter is that nothing in this play makes any difference. It is by turns really funny and terribly tragic. While Beckett denies it, it has usually been interpreted as his proclamation that all of our waiting for God to act in the lives of humanity and in the life of the world, all our hopes that God will do something about the evil in the world and the despair, are futile. We are waiting for Godot and he’s not coming. In that, he sums up modern man. Modern humanity thinks that we are alone, thinks that God has abandoned us if He ever was real at all, and that we are now on our own for good or ill.

The message of this day, to Samuel Beckett, to the 20th century, and to modern humanity is, “Wake up! Wake up! Your waiting is over. You are waiting for something that has already happened and in fact, is happening even now!” The answer to Beckett and to the despair and the hopelessness of modern man is right here in the story that the apostle John conveys in the 20th chapter of his gospel. I’d like for us to take a look at that now.

It’s a story that begins seemingly as a simple case of grave robbing. John focuses on Mary Magdalene and he says that she came running to the tomb when she saw the stone move. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the kinds of stones that were used to cover cave-hewn graves in those days. They were not boulders, they were not spherical. Rather, they had been sculpted in such a way that they were round and they were tall enough to cover the entrance and they would roll, usually on a kind of track that would allow easy access if someone desired to get in. They were also too heavy to be moved just by one or two people. Well, she saw that the stone had been moved and was undoubtedly alarmed. She didn’t look in the tomb. Instead she goes to find Peter and John. Keep in mind, she is stricken with grief at this point. The grief that she feels is the kind of grief that people feel when they discover a person that they loved and has been buried has had his grave disturbed. Some people think, “What’s the big deal? It’s just a dead body.” But if you’ve ever encountered someone who has had a member of their family’s grave be the victim of vandals, people who knock over tombstones or do stuff like that, you know how upsetting that is. That’s the kind of mindset that Mary Magdalene had. She says in verse

2, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” So it’s not just that somebody has been in the tomb. It’s that the body is gone. And who knows what kind of purpose the people who stole it might have wanted to put it to.

Well, the focus now, for a moment, shifts to Peter and John. John got there first. He is very careful to let us know that. Keep in mind this is the man who refers to himself not by name, but as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” I have no doubt that Jesus did have a special place in His heart for John, but John also makes clear he was one of the inner circle. Well, John got there first and he looked in and saw the cloths that were used to cover the body, the shroud, but he didn’t go in. Verses 4-5 say that the other disciple, John, outran Peter. It makes sense because he was almost certainly a couple decades younger. And he reached the tomb first. He bent over, looked in and saw the strips of linen there but he didn’t go in. We don’t know why, but he must have thought there was no need to actually go in the tomb. He could see what the story was and, let’s face it, there are some people who really don’t like entering places like that. People feel that way about mausoleums, there are some people who feel that way about crypts, and John evidently at first, at least, didn’t want to go in. Peter – we know Peter, the man who barges in where most people would back away – comes in and he sees the same scene and goes into the tomb. He sees the facecloth folded up on one side. So whatever happened here, this was not necessarily a violent act. Somebody acted with respect, at least enough respect to fold the grave cloths before taking the body out. John at that point decides to go in and we are told in verse 8 that he saw and believed. We’re not told what he believed. He goes on to say they still didn’t understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead, so what it was that he believed was not that Jesus was alive. Evidently he now believed Mary’s story that someone had taken the body.

At this point in verse 10 we come back to Mary Magdalene. In her grief Mary didn’t leave the tomb. John and Peter went back to their homes. Well, this was interesting, but it’s obviously, “We can’t do anything about it.” So they didn’t. They went back to their homes, which was a peculiar kind of response. But for whatever reason they thought they would have nothing more to do with this. Mary, though, stood outside the tomb crying. Remember, this was a grieving woman and her grief has been compounded. It was bad enough to see Jesus crucified and to see Him dead. But now for His body to have been stolen when she and the other women had come to anoint Him, was more than she could handle. So verse 11 says that she wept, but that she also then bent over to look into the tomb herself. There she saw two angels in white, signifying their purity, and they were seated where Jesus had been, one at the foot and one at the head. They asked why she was crying. Reasonable question. Her answer is “They have taken my Lord away and I don’t know where they have put Him.” Now their answer could have been, “What’s the big deal about a dead body? He’s dead. What difference does it make?” But of course that wouldn’t have been truthful and it wouldn’t have been appropriate to the situation. So they don’t say anything. Instead, she gets the sense that there’s somebody behind her, and so she turns around and she sees Jesus standing there, but she didn’t realize that it was Him.

Some people have wondered how could this woman who had spent so much time over the previous two or three years with Jesus, then encounter Him and not have known who He was? Well, I'll put it to you this way. If Pastor Neil were to have a heart attack and die tonight, God forbid, and we hold his funeral later in the week, and we see him buried in a grave somewhere in Pennsylvania, no doubt, probably right outside of Three Rivers Stadium. No, I'm sorry. PNC Park. Three Rivers has been torn down. Anyway, we see all that happen and then next Sunday morning I look out into the congregation here and I see someone who looks like him sitting right there, what would be my assumption? "Gee, I didn't know Neil had a twin brother." I certainly wouldn't think that it was him. Mary and the others were not expecting the resurrection. They had missed the message. John says in verse 9, they still did not understand from Scripture or, for that matter, from Jesus' teaching, that He had to rise from the dead. So for her to see this person, it couldn't be Him, so it must be somebody else. He asks her in verse 15, "Why are you crying? Who is it that you're looking for?" She thinks He is the gardener. Makes sense. There would be a certain amount of sense to someone who tended the grounds to have gone in the tomb for some reason or another. But why would he have not brought Him back? She says, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him and I will get Him." And by "get Him" she means "I and my comrades will go and we will get the body and we will bring it back to the tomb and we will do the anointing rituals and then we will ask you to close the tomb back up." That is still what she's thinking has got to happen, because as we all know, dead people don't come back from the dead, so this has to be somebody else.

At that moment Jesus, according to verse 16, says a single word to her, "Mary." He calls her by name. You know He didn't do that previously. He just called her "Woman." Well, that's what you might have expected from a gardener, a stranger. But by calling her by name and no doubt doing so in the most tender of voices, He lets her know, "I am the One that you're looking for." She hadn't been looking for a risen Savior. She had been looking for a corpse. But in that one word she found out who it was that she was actually looking for and her response in verse 16 is that she cried out in Aramaic, which would have been her native language, "Rabboni!" which means "teacher." No doubt the first thing that came to her mind was simply, "It's you! It's you!" She found what she was not looking for on that first Easter Sunday.

The interesting thing is that here we are 2,000 years later and there are still lots of people who are looking for something other than the real Christ. Some people are looking for a domesticated Christ who will not challenge their assumptions, but will stay safely locked up in their own heads. Earlier this week I read this from a New York University professor, a person who was a former Roman Catholic seminarian, and he was going to be a priest. Imagine a priest speaking this way. "The miracle of a bodily resurrection was something I rejected without moving away from its basic idea." The resurrection, of course, is not an idea, it's an event. But nevertheless, he continues, "What I mean is we can reach the lowest points of our lives, going deep into a place that feels like death and then find our way out again. That's the story the resurrection now tells me. If we think about the metaphor of the resurrection, that allows us to return to the story year after year and find new meaning in it."

The resurrection is not a metaphor. It's not an idea. It's not a concept. It's not something that we find meaning in. If anybody ever asks you, "What's the real meaning of Easter?" – I saw that in a headline of a newspaper column earlier this week, the real meaning of Easter – there's no "real meaning of Easter." Easter is about something that happened and in happening changed everything. I don't know about you, but as fabulous as the thoughts are that run through my head on a daily basis, they don't change the world. The truth of the matter is that much of the time they don't even change my life or have any effect on it whatsoever. They're just there for my entertainment. That's not what the resurrection is! The resurrection is a reality outside of ourselves.

Some are looking for a Christ who will ratify their humanism. There's one Presbyterian Church USA pastor who's written this: "The entire house of cards is based on the idea of an invented deity who will punish those who don't choose correctly. No deity exists. Not Jesus Christ, not Yahweh, not Baal, not Marduk, not Allah, not Zeus, not the blind spaghetti monster, not the Wizard of Oz. None of them exist. They're all figments of the imagination. So at the end of the day, what is important, my friends? Believing in gods and their supernatural tricks or is it trust that the qualities that we project onto these beings are really in us if we open ourselves to that possibility?" Translation: "Surely you will not die but your eyes will be opened and you will be like God." Why a person like that even occupies a Christian pulpit, I don't know, but he's very much in tune with the spirit of the times, which is looking not for someone out there, someone beyond ourselves, but instead is looking to find the divine right here in those things between my ears.

Some are looking for a Christ who will make them sound really smart. There's a fellow by the name of Dairmund O'Murchu, Irishman I believe, who calls himself a quantum theologian, whatever that means. He wrote this: "The concept of resurrection helps us to contextualize our affinity to mystery to make real and tangible the awe and apprehension that is deep within our being. It embodies our yearning for infinity, stretching back over millions of years and serving to connect us with the infinite eons that still lie ahead." And if you can tell me what that means, I have an internet phrase generator to sell to you, because I think that's where that came from. It's just meaningless words. And it's meaningless words because, once again, we have someone who wants to turn an event into an idea.

That's what the world is looking for these days. The world is looking for a good idea. But we don't have a good idea for them. We have a living Savior, One who in His death and resurrection has triumphed over the grave. That's what we have for the world. And Jesus now shows Mary that by showing that He's alive. Now, and only now, does He call her by name. He calls her "Mary." And she recognizes Him at that moment. It's like she wakes up and no doubt she went to grab Him. I don't know about you, but I suspect it would have been a perfectly natural response on the part of any of us to have seen Him alive and looking well. We would have wanted to just hug the stuffing out of Him, or put ourselves prostrate on the ground at His feet and just hold onto Him. So He tells her, "Don't hold on to me. I have to ascend to the Father because there is more for Me even yet to still do, even though it's not going to be here."

So Mary is a transformed woman. Verse 18 tells us that the one who had come to the tomb looking for a dead body to anoint, went to the disciples with this news: “I have seen the Lord.” And she told them that He had said these things to her. Mary Magdalene, the first evangelist, the first person to proclaim the good news that Christ was alive, that death was past, that death had been defeated, that He had triumphed over it. And now everything was different. The hopelessness that characterizes so much of the world that we live in is the result of looking in the wrong place for the wrong person. The world wants God to swoop in and fix everything and everyone. That’s not what God does. What God does is do what we can’t do for ourselves, which is to win the victory over the sinful nature that plagues us, over the death that ends us, over Satan who binds us. And He did that on Easter Sunday. This is what we believe, it is what we know, it is the message that Mary proclaimed, it is the message the apostles proclaimed, it is the message of the church for the last 2,000 years, and it is our message.

In the face of an unbelieving, despairing, hopeless world, we have but one piece of good news for them: ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!***