

**“ARRIVING FOR EASTER”**  
**A Sermon Preached at**  
**FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Belleville, IL**  
**By The Rev Rob Dyer**  
**April 20, 2025**  
(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture this morning is from John 20:1-18.

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But*

*go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her. NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, you people don't know the pressure it is to come up with a good sermon for Easter. I mean, look how many of you are here. This has got to be a good one. I can't give you a B- level sermon today. This has got to be A+ material, so I thought to myself, what does a modern preacher do to really bring that A+ game. So, here in the year 2025 I did what many other pastors around the nation are doing this Sunday. I turned to AI.

I mean I started off and I went to it and I said what are five big mistakes that pastors make when they are preaching an Easter sermon, and it came back with a lot of good advice. Then I got this kind of old devil on my shoulder kind of idea, and I said, "Could you write the introduction to probably the most terrible Easter sermon ever given?" And it did. And this is it.

It said, "OK. Here are the opening two minutes of a sermon designed to be truly terrible for Easter Sunday. Hitting several common pitfalls." And it comes with stage direction, so I will try to embody everything it is suggesting to me.

Hello. Hello. Is the mic working? OK! Good! Settle down! Settle down folks! Wow! Look at all these people. Haven't seen some of you since, well maybe last Easter. Good to have you though you know those pews are here every Sunday. Just sayin'. The heat costs the same whether it's full or empty.

Anyway, before we begin the message for today, just a couple of quick things that have been on my mind that I want to talk about.

First, the annual church picnic sign-up sheet is in the foyer. Please use legible handwriting this year. Brenda spent 3 hours last year trying to figure out if Glorf Snickle was really going to bring potato salad.

Second, whoever parked a large blue SUV blocking the emergency exit behind the Fellowship Hall, you need to move it immediately. Now! Chief Miller called me personally about it last year and frankly I don't need that headache again.

So, Easter, right? Big day! Lots of expectations. Bunnies! Eggs! Candy! New outfits! It's a lot.

Honestly preparing this week I was thinking more about my own frustrations in my life. Like right now we're trying to get a zoning board to approve the expansion of our parking lot. Talk about a resurrection that needs to happen there. It's just one thing after another. Makes you wonder though sometimes, doesn't it? I mean about things . . . big things like, why are things the way they are?

I read an article this week. It was about advanced particle physics. Fascinating stuff. Really makes you think. You know. About stuff. It did mention bunnies though. That was interesting.

Okay. The reading today, it's uh . . .

And that's where it left off. I say it did a really good job of an awful sermon, so it will make whatever I say next sound really great. That's all that was about.

I think one of the things that was about the awfulness about it is that it was completely inconsiderate of you. Of where your lives are. Of what you're going through. We're a community brought together and we're meant to reflect that and it really didn't seem to have much to do with the Easter message either, did it? But we're people who come from all sorts of places and we arrive for Easter. It's hard enough to arrive for Easter as the preaching pastor, but some of you battled a lot this morning getting here. Some of it is just an alarm clock. Some of it is small children. Some of it is, who knows? But there are lots of things going on in our lives.

The people who arrived for Easter in our scripture passage today were coming from a lot of different places in their mindset. Mary Magdalene shows up and she sees that the stone is rolled away and she just has this fear that someone has stolen the body, so she runs off to go get the disciples.

Why does she have to run to go get the disciples? Cause they're nowhere to be seen. Everybody went lame at the crucifixion it seems. So, she has to run and go get these no-shows, and get these guys to come back. Well, they're a little excited cause someone stole the body. Well, I don't know and so they start running.

And, it's just listed as the one who Jesus loves, he gets there first, but then pauses a second. Then here comes eager Peter. Peter, in the Bible, is a character who just like can't wait for anything. Wants to always do something. Wants to always figure

things out. Let's do that, Lord, and so he goes racing in there. He takes a look at the scene. He arrives for Easter and he's in investigation mode. He's going to look at the details. Okay. Things are folded up over there and then he leaves and goes home.

Actually, one of the other gospels tells us a bit more. It says, Peter after seeing all this wondered. That's as far as Peter got. Huh! That's the great witness of Peter at the resurrection on Easter. Huh!

But the one whom Jesus loved looked at it all and believed and then it tells us right afterwards, but they didn't understand what was going on. This other disciple just had something that stirred in him that brought about a belief, a strength in faith, but the evidence wasn't sufficient to line it all up for them. They didn't understand. They didn't get it and yet that one believed and sometimes on our best day, with the signs that we have of God's presence in our lives, of the faith that's been active, of what we see going on with the Spirit of God in this world, some of us see those signs and we have that faith.

Me, I'll admit to you, my whole life, I've been a Peter. I've been that one who wants to race. Let's go. Let's get something done. Let's do something. Let's accomplish something. Let's figure it out. Surely, we can analyze this and understand what's going on.

At the end of the day those two just head back home, but Mary Magdalene comes back because for her, this arriving at Easter is really more of sadness. What has happened? She's convinced that the body has been taken away. She's distraught. There's an appearance before her. "What are you looking for?"

She's so distraught. Doesn't hear that. Then Jesus appears before her. She doesn't recognize him, but he recognizes her. And in the midst of her grief, in the midst of her sadness, with that weight upon her, she felt recognized by her Savior. And then she recognized him.

Now I think for some of us, this is where we are, arriving for Easter. Some of you have incredible burdens in your lives right now. Heavy loads that you are carrying. Just sometimes it seems like too much. And here you are for Easter, and there's some preacher up front and he's going to try and tell you there is a lot of good news. But it doesn't seem like there is a lot of good news. There's some preacher up front who's going to talk about hope and mercy and grace and love, but that's not your experience. In a lot of the circles, in a lot of the places you've been along your journey before you arrived here for Easter.

I did a thing that I don't know if I ever want to do again. I went to four major news websites and just read through them. I went to MSNBC. I went to Newsmax. I went to CNN. I went to Fox News. Read through all four of them. This is the source of information that is going out there amongst us. These are the things and stories that are being told, and you know what I found on every single one of those pages? Fear! Every single one of them. Whether it was on the right or the left, wanted to make you afraid of something. Because making you afraid will get you to click. Because making you afraid is going to hold your attention. And make no mistake, that's the goal. To hold you just a little bit longer, to get a little bit more of your attention so they can sell the advertisement that goes with it and collect the data on what you tend to stare at. What you are left with is this feeling that the world is ugly and falling apart and that you should live a life motivated by fear and dread.

So, you arrive at the tomb maybe a little bit like Mary Magdalene, maybe a little bit like Peter, maybe a little bit like the other disciples, but maybe a lot like somebody who has had fear jammed down your throat day after day after day.

But what we try to do here, in the space of this Christian community, this group of followers of Jesus Christ, is to be a witness that says, fear does not win the day. That the Easter message that you are meant to come and be changed by as Mary Magdalene was changed, as Peter was changed, as the other disciple was changed, the message that you are supposed to come before Easter, not just the service, but I mean the awareness of what God has done is a transformation. It's a change. Something is different. But that's hard because we're coming from so many different places and mindsets and levels of faith, even locations.

Look, we've got people here from Minnesota. From California. We even have people from Germany here. Wave Germans. Do you think we all have the exact same experience that we can be lumped into one of those three examples from today's scripture? No! It's a million different combinations of where you are and what you're dealing with, but there is one message that we as followers of Jesus Christ want to tell again and again so it can be part of that story that we each are individually developing and living and it's this.

That God welcomes us and loves us from wherever we have come. This welcome statement on the back of our handout. This needs to be real. It is important that it is a clear message that goes out that there is not a place along your journey that you might come from that you should not walk through these doors and find yourself welcome before the empty tomb. Welcome before the good news of Jesus Christ. Welcome before the good news of God's love for you who came not to walk around

and go, “You! You! Not you! You! No! No! No!” but came to say, “All are welcome!” And this love is available and there is not one of us who gets to discount any human being and say, “You’re not worthy of that love. You don’t get that mercy, that love, that justice, that grace.”

Where there is someone suffering, we show up. Where there is someone who is overwhelmed, we care for them. That’s what we do as the people of God and that becomes a light of hope. And so we practice it again and again here in faulty ways, but we are trying. We’re trying to live lives that are worthy of this good news that happens on Easter. That death doesn’t win. That sin doesn’t win. That brokenness doesn’t win. What wins is love. What wins is grace and mercy and peace and justice.

And while it is wonderful that you have arrived for Easter, yes, this service and this message and all that. What is important is where you go from here and what words you speak and what light you shine because this world doesn’t need you to be a fear monger. This world needs you to be an agent of grace and mercy and love and justice. And yes, sometimes you need to stand up to some nincompoop who is doing something that is not right, but you know what? Most importantly is that you stand up with love, because without that we are noisy gongs. We are clanging cymbals. We are wasting what has been done for us in this Easter message.

May God be glorified by where you go from here.

Halleluiah and Amen.