

Not for the Faint of Heart
A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
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I don't think I'm going out on a limb here, suggesting that Easter has been co-opted by North American consumer culture. Visit any of our countless discount dollar store franchises, a month ago there was a full aisle there dedicated to all things Easter aisle: chocolate goodies, bunnies, and bright coloured banners wishing us a Happy Easter.

Christianity, thankfully, no longer dominates our world. We have a great deal to atone for from the years when Christianity lorded power over cultures. No, we have much less power, but now we face a dilemma; consumerism has branded Easter. A fluffy brand of Easter has crept into churches. I don't know about you, but it takes some effort, some discipline, for me to spiritually connect with the power of Easter.

So, I'm wondering this morning: What *is* the core Gospel Easter message? Each of the 4 Gospels tells this story a little differently, John tells it quite differently from the other 3.

Unique in John's telling of the story is the focus on Mary, Mary weeping outside the tomb, she then looks in and finds no body of Jesus, but instead two angels who ask her why on earth she is weeping. She moves to leave the tomb and encounters a man, he looks like the gardener to her, he sees her weeping and he too asks her why she is weeping.

Given the circumstances, and who these divine characters are, this is a ridiculous question. Mary has left for the tomb at dawn, grieving deeply after watching Jesus die a gruesome death as a criminal. The followers of Jesus are fearing for their lives, knowing that if they are to act on what they believe their public witness puts them a great risk. To makes things far worse, Mary sees no body in the tomb! And she is asked, "Why are you crying?!"

This is a highly charged story! There have been many attempts in movies and television at contriving sensational plot lines; reality shows taking us into life-and-death situations of life; an action-thriller movie creating huge suspense, surprising us just when we think things have quieted down.

But this ancient encounter at the tomb on the first Easter morning; I recall scholar Marcus Borg putting it so well at a lecture. He said, and I paraphrase, "We don't know exactly what happened that morning, but it was so powerful an experience of the holy Mary's good news message spread like wildfire, and a movement that became Christianity was born."

A great swing of emotions: from heartbreak to hallelujah, in that brief moment where Mary heard her Lord utter her name. "I have seen the Lord!" The first sermon ever preached. How could any modern preacher presume to match the wonder?!

But here's the problem, in my opinion. I'm *comfortable*. Yes, it's true. I'm soft, I have not faced close to the duress of those first followers of Jesus. If I was a Palestinian

Christian in Bethlehem, my family home of 5 generation facing a demolition order by the Israeli government – maybe I'd understand Mary better.

I imagine the victims who survived the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton Colorado, 20 years ago. At a ceremony yesterday to mark the awful anniversary, one survivor, now grown up and a parent himself, shared how he fears for his children. It is in that shared experience of fear, of vulnerability, those Columbine survivors connect with Mary that first Easter. Victims and families in Colorado to who fought for more stringent laws now passed that control who can purchase guns.

Perhaps at least part of the message of Easter is not at all about God's gift of new life we wait for after we die. Maybe Easter is about the big swing from evil and death to transformation and new life in THIS life. The early Christian sermons right after Mary – Peter's, Paul's – they all referenced this great moment of Jesus' resurrection and they moved listeners from all walks of life to commit themselves to a way of life modelled after Jesus. The transformations we are talking about here are NOT for the faint of heart, my friends.

The hearts racing as the disciples heard Mary's declaration that she had seen her Lord – it would have been utter chaos. So here we are, the remnant, the modern-day Jesus movement. Can you find your place of loss and grief, or vulnerability, fear? Can you walk with Mary to that tomb? Can you feel the pain, the confusion, the anger? Then, there in that pit of despair, you hear your name. In a disorienting, often unjust world, there walking with you is the holy presence. At the heart of Easter is wonder, surprise, and mystery. Go now, find Alleluia in your Easter.

One: Christ is risen.

ALL: Christ is risen indeed!