

Easter Sunday April 17, 2022  
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**So Real it Makes us Gasp**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

There is an Easter sermon I give to children - and adults enjoy just as much - that begins with a toy rabbit like this one. Once I show the toy, I ask the question: is this rabbit real? So, far, every time I've asked that question, I've gotten the same answer. No, every child and adult replied, the rabbit is not real. Then I challenge that answer by saying, Isn't it? I can see it. I can touch it and smell it. I can hold it and move it. I can weigh it. I can like it, or dislike it, even love it. Just because it isn't alive doesn't mean it isn't real.

Then, I switch gears a bit and talk about Jesus. Jesus is real. He was born and lived like all of us do. People could see him, touch him, talk to him, listen to him, they could weigh him if they wanted to, laugh and cry with him, like him, dislike him, even love him. Not everybody loved him. Some hated him, some were afraid of him. He was killed. He died. And all of that that was real. But. Just when it looked like Jesus was gone, something happened.

At this point in the sermon, a parishioner who was out of sight brought out a live bunny rabbit. And there was an audible gasp from everyone. No one saw that twist coming.

Now, I'm sorry to disappoint you today. No one is going to bring out a live bunny. In other parishes I served there were parishioners who had pet rabbits that I visited often and had a good relationship with. The people and rabbit knew me, trusted me, and liked me so it was safe for the rabbit, the children, and me to bring the bunny to church on Easter for the sermon. Even without the live rabbit, the concept can still work. You just have to imagine a live rabbit.

After the audible gasp of surprise and delight was over, I talked about how both the toy and the living bunny are real rabbits. The living one is just somehow more than the toy.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, he was different from the way he had been before. He was still Jesus. He was still real. But he was somehow more, and this *more* made it hard to recognize him. It is difficult to understand because we are not familiar with the kind of life – resurrection life - that started when Jesus was raised from the dead. We can't buy it or make it or control it. But just because we are not familiar with it, doesn't mean it isn't real. Resurrection is real and it is what God does with those God loves, and God loves you.

We may not have a live rabbit with us today, and that is okay. Because it wasn't the rabbit that was the Easter part of the sermon. It was the gasp. The

moment everyone was pleasantly jolted from one way of thinking to being open so seeing something more. That brief moment is probably pretty close to what happened to Mary Magdalen on the morning she went to the tomb and found it empty.

At first, she probably gasped too, but not from delight. We heard in the Gospel she was upset that the body of Jesus was not where it was supposed to be. She ran and got two friends, who were also followers of Jesus, and they ran to the tomb to check out her story. We heard they looked inside and found what she said was true. The body was gone. They believed her. However, they didn't seem to know what to do about it, so they left. Mary stayed. When angels appeared and asked her why she was crying she told them she didn't know where Jesus' dead body was.

It's important to notice that Mary and the disciples saw the empty tomb as a problem, not a miracle. They assumed the body of Jesus was gone because of some evil intention like grave robbing, which was a common crime. They didn't know anything different at the time. They certainly didn't know about resurrection life, so they couldn't imagine any other reason for the disappearance of Jesus' body.

Even when the Risen Jesus himself asked Mary why she was crying she didn't recognize him. This tells us something important about resurrection life. Often Mary's inability to recognize Jesus gets interpreted as grief or hysteria. But Mary was only interpreting the situation by what she knew, by what we all know all too well. Mary saw a problem that needed fixing, which she could do by controlling it. The problem was Jesus' body had been taken away and it needed to be put back where it belonged. The only solution she could imagine was finding the body and putting it back or taking it somewhere else. When the Risen Christ asked her why she was crying, she saw someone who might help her with this problem by telling her where the body was. Because that is what she needed. Then she could take care of everything. She could clean up the mess. She could fix the problem. She could right a wrong. This is all pretty reasonable thinking.

Mary hadn't seen resurrection life yet so we can't blame her or patronize her for not recognizing the risen Jesus. But she was about to. She saw it the moment the Risen Jesus did something he had done before his resurrection: he called her by her name. Perhaps she gasped again. This time it may have been like those surprised and delighted gasps I heard when the live rabbit appeared. Biblical scholars suggest that was the moment Mary stopped seeing the empty tomb as a problem to be solved and manifestation of death and instead saw it as a testimony to the power of possibility of life. And so, she must have gasped and reached for Jesus.

Many scholars and commentators have posited what it could mean when the Risen Jesus told Mary she could not hold on to him. It is perhaps, his first post-resurrection teaching that he cannot be treated as he was before he died because he is now more alive. He cannot be contained. It's like the difference between a toy and a living animal. The preconceived expectations about him, what we thought we knew about Jesus, the teacher, healer, miracle worker, walker on water, cannot be used to hold back the new life he is bringing into the world through his resurrection. Because there is so much more than we can imagine. Maybe not "more" in the consumer sense of the word, but more in the sense of the power of possibility of life that can make us gasp in delight.

Jesus' resurrection is just the beginning. It can be difficult to understand or see it, especially because resurrection life is something we cannot control, only be part of, like Mary. Resurrection life doesn't belittle or negate life as we know it or make it any less real. Like the living rabbit does not negate the toy one. Resurrection doesn't dismiss the pain of loss, but somehow makes it more, because resurrection life is in the love that connects us to God and to each other. The love Jesus embodied when he was alive and lives in the resurrection. We need to remember resurrection life is not just life after death, it is new life in our world that can still show up at any time.

It might look like a person choosing to leave an abusive relationship whether it is with a family member, partner, or employer or employee, even if they aren't sure what life outside that relationship will be like. It might be the person who loves again after the loss or death of a parent, spouse, or child. It might be the person in recovery from a disease who lives life a little more without the weight of the disease holding them down. Resurrection life is anytime anyone breaks free from expectations or constraints that prevent them from living a life of love and peace that God intended when God created the world and everything and everyone. Resurrection life can help us see the difference between redemptive suffering and abuse. Resurrection life can help us see the life and possibility in every kind of change: in our bodies, relationships, society, and institutions. Resurrection life is anytime anyone can practice hope when things look dire. Because resurrection life isn't life without pain or suffering, it is redeemed life in this world with the Risen Christ who embodies the power and possibility of God's love that is real and so much more than we can imagine, which is why it can make us gasp with delight.