

HAPPY BLUE-BALONEY-BUT-BINGO-BLURT!

An Easter Sermon on John 20:1-18 (reworked from 2008)—Rev. Adam Earl Eckhart
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Christianity borrows the word “Easter” from a religious tradition that pre-dates it, and the word doesn’t really explain what we celebrate today, so I submit to you another name to replace “Easter”: **Blue-Baloney-But-Bingo-Blurt**. It just rolls off the tongue!

Okay, I may need to explain my alliterative choice of words. “Blue-Baloney-But-Bingo-Blurt” refers to the different ways in which the first Easter witnesses experience God and the ways in which God and we continue to engage in the Good News today.

Blue: Just before sunrise, Mary Magdalene “comes to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses”. She comes to pay respects. Her thoughts likely center on the tragic events of Thursday and Friday: the arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion of her teacher Jesus. But as she nears the tomb, she sees that the rock, which had sealed the tomb just on Friday, has been rolled away! She doesn’t even bother to look inside. She can imagine what has happened—something awful! Vandals have desecrated the place where Jesus was laid to rest—no, robbers have taken his body away! In her sorrow, Mary assumes the worst.

This is also how many of us encounter life right now and therefore how we encounter Easter. We may be awash in bad news—a relative’s cancer diagnosis or other health crisis, relationship turmoil, getting older, financial troubles, political antagonism, terrorism, raising kids in a violent world. Death and doom

everywhere. Some media push us to look at the world through the lens of antagonism and hopelessness. And God, we may believe, isn’t sweeping away our worries and our cares. God may not be in sight. We may be saying: ‘I don’t want to see people smile or hear joyful tunes, I don’t want lilies or talk about some resurrection. I want someone to notice my sorrow and do something about it.’ We can’t see the world in front of us through the tears and anxiety. It’s difficult to even absorb the good news, let alone believe it, when you’re preoccupied with yourself. It’s a part of life: Mary Magdalene and some of us are singin’ the BLUES.

Baloney: John’s gospel leaves out a detail that is included in Luke. The New Revised Standard Version translates Luke 24 this way: “Returning from the tomb, they [the women] told all this [their encounter with the risen Christ] to the eleven [remaining inner disciples] and to all the rest. But these words seemed to them [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

“Idle tale”: That’s an interesting translation! I went with several dozen church members last week to the Sound Tigers hockey game, which reminded me of playing in my college hockey pep band. When my bandmates fell into disbelief over what they thought was a bad call or were upset over a goal scored on our team, they would use colorful language. I kept my language to words more appropriate in the presence of children: I called the opposing team “meanies”; When I didn’t agree with

refs, I'd say: "Hogwash" "Balderdash," "Fiddlesticks!" or "That's stinky!" As Anna Carter Florence likes to put it, 'idle tale' is like my fiddlesticks, while the actual translation for the Greek word "leiros" should be more colorful and less PG. Basically, our English translation has bleeped out the grown-up word.

We too hear the Easter story and many of us—because it's new to us, because it conflicts with our scientific beliefs, or because we're generally skeptical people—say, "I think that's a bunch of bleep!" or in a vein that kids can understand, "That's Baloney!" I think we all react at least a little bit that way to the story. "Someone rising from the dead? How can that be? What's dead is dead. No comin' back. Resurrection? Baloney!" And baloney is an important part of the Easter story. I mean, if we don't react with at least some substantial disbelief or shock, we're not really paying attention to the significance of the event. Without baloney as at least an initial response, the story can have no claim on us. So on the count of three, I want us all to honor this instinctive response to Easter by shouting, "Baloney!"

1, 2, 3: "BALONEY!"

Now that we got that out (or out of our systems), we can move forward, for baloney isn't the end of the story. Next there's **But**. By "but" I mean a turn toward the possibility of faith. It's what happens when Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb in John's version, look in and then go inside, finding the wrappings folded and rolled up but no sign of Jesus' body. "Huh," I imagine them wondering, "What if the missing body means something? What if it means something really good?" Or for us today, we ask: "What if this story

that I believed as a kid—and maybe dismissed when I became an adult—really *is* true on a level I couldn't get before?"

"But" is the sneaking suspicion, that glimmer of faith that maybe, just maybe, God really worked through Jesus Christ to reveal something amazing and beautiful to us. It's the wild thought that the Jesus who taught with authority was raised back up by the source of that authority. The Beloved disciple leaves the empty tomb with the prospect that Jesus' death wasn't the end of the story but really a new beginning that changes everything. He wasn't sure how, but he believed something good was happening.

All of us who are invested in the life and death of Jesus can sit on the fence between skepticism and faith. To have faith or not to have faith? Through the Holy Spirit, God uses the Easter story nudge us toward hope in God. "I know there are a thousand reasons not to believe, but what would it mean if God really brought Jesus back and has power even over death?" "I know it sounds crazy, but if God created the world, why can't God work in the world to reach out to us in love?" So much pain, so much sorrow, but God's presence surprises and reignites life. There is blue, there is baloney, and there is an ambivalent, disorienting tipping point: BUT.

Then there's **Bingo**. Now Bingo is a game-o but more precisely BINGO is that moment of ultimate discovery that the whole game builds and leads toward and which brings joy at least to those who get to experience it. Bingo is the joy of things coming together in your life or your heart and mind!

The Easter story builds to bingo. The Beloved Disciple and Peter leave Mary

Magdalene in the garden alone again, where she's still tangled up in blue. Peeking into the tomb, though, Mary sees two men in the tomb, whom we're told are angels. Angels usually lead with "Fear not!" because **angels scare people**. But if you're as blue as Mary is, you don't need a "Fear not," you need a "Cry not." So the angels ask, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary still wants to know where the body was taken. Then she turns, and there's the risen Christ standing there—but her grief still keeps her from recognizing him. He asks her the same question as the angels, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and adds, "Whom are you looking for? (Hint! Hint!)" She doesn't figure it out. Finally, not even the risen Christ can handle it anymore, so he says, "Mary!?!?" and finally—Bingo!—she **recognizes** him.

Bingo! Her rabbi and teacher, Jesus, is alive, after she knows full well that he was really dead. Bingo! In that moment, God encounters her through the risen Jesus Christ, the risen Christ calls her name. Bingo! The Easter miracle is better than anything she could have imagined. Bingo! This divine deed changes everything. B-I-N-G-O!

God still encounters us through Bingo moments. We who have been in times of blue, baloney or but suddenly notice that God is standing right in front of us. Through prayer or action, through everyday or extraordinary circumstances, we are encountered by the holiness that only comes from God. By God's very presence we learn the good news of God's undying love, that God isn't just the focus of some old, old story made up 2,000 years ago to make us feel better about our pain but that God is still here with us today, waiting to greet us with the possibility of

new focus and new life, the possibility of resurrection in the image of Christ and his rising from the dead.

Bingo is about more than seeing God; it's about seeing God's power over all other forces. If God is in charge, then nothing can separate us from the love of God, not fear, not money, greed, jealousy or hatred, violence or death. Jesus may let the deathly powers torture and crucify him, but **no power can keep our good God dead**. God wins the final victory. BINGO!

Jesus tells Mary not to touch him. Because she can't hold on to him or control what will happen next. What is going to happen by John's account is that the Christ, exalted in death and resurrection, is soon to complete his round trip back to God his Father and our Father, his God and our God. God is acting through his Son to share the ultimate joy of human life! We are being saved right now by our God. Bingo!

Which brings us to...**Blurt:** Jesus gives Mary precise directions in their Resurrection encounter. "Tell them about what I've done and am about to do. Share me. Share our relationship, share this encounter with them. Tell this good news! Blurt it out!"

Now, Mary doesn't go tell it on the mountain or go convert total strangers, at least not at first. No, instead she tells people already familiar with Jesus and with her: the disciples. I love how John tells it: Mary runs into the room and just spills the beans: "I have seen the Lord!" By sharing her encounter of the risen Christ, Mary lays the groundwork for the risen Christ to be recognized by others in the days to come. By John's account, then, Mary Magdalene—a **woman**—is the first preacher of the good news.

This hints to us that it's not the pitch of a person's voice that matters in preaching Easter and Good News, it's not their gender or age, their educational level, appearance, or anything else in their background. The only thing that matters in preaching Easter is one's faithfulness: one's willingness to see through life's tears and sorrows and into God's transforming and resurrecting work in their lives and in the lives of others. Mary accepts the reality of Jesus' death and yet sees life beyond that death through the risen Christ who visits her. She is willing to testify to her experience, to share her Good News with others even if it means risking people shouting "Baloney!" at her, because she is living in a new Easter joy. This joy is what prepares the disciples to see Christ later that day, and what then gives them the joy to prepare Thomas to see Christ the next week and so on and so forth.

God calls those who have experienced the bingo of Easter to blurt out, to give witness to our joy so that we may pave the way for more bingos to come. Every Sunday morning and every worship is a little Easter, an event of proclamation in praise, prayer and proclamation that blesses us with the opportunity to encounter God together or alone. Every Sunday morning the blurting of the Good News of God's love bleeds into our community, blessing it too.

The church is that collection of Blues, Baloneys, Buts, Bingos and Blurters who relate to each other with love and who relate to Easter with love for God who is the center of this life-defining and life-transforming story.

When we cry or sing the blues, others accompany us, encourage and pray for us.

When we shout baloney, our siblings in faith affirm our doubts and the ways that Easter faith radically departs from the world's story of death. When we waver in the uncertainty of "but," we share that moment with others who look down from the precipice and contemplate a leap of faith. When our souls go Bingo! We are tapped on the shoulders by those who are looking out for the tell-tale signs of Easter joy. And when we blurt out the Good News of our joy to others we have a receptive and gracious audience here to thank God for our witness to God's undying love through Jesus Christ. That is why I and many others come back here again and again, 52 weeks a year, to live the blessing that is Blue-Baloney-But-Bingo-Blurt community and to live out its implications in joyful worship and service, to bless and bleed God's Easter love throughout Milford and beyond.

Let me blurt it out: I have seen the Lord here in Milford and beyond!

Let me blurt it out: Through Christ, God does not banish death for now but is victorious over death!

Let me blurt it out: He is risen indeed!

So, happy Blue-Baloney-But-Bingo-Blurt (also known as Easter)! Alleluia and Amen!