

THE GOOD CLUES

A 9 A.M. Easter Sermon on John 20:1-18—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
April 16, 2017—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

1.

“Colonel Mustard, in the Conservatory, with the Candlestick.”

Whenever we visited our grandparent’s house, my brother and I would gather at the table and play Clue, methodically uncovering by whom, where and how Mr. Body was killed.

The board game was just one way I was raised to appreciate a good mystery. Maybe that shouldn’t be a surprise, because I grew up to be a Mr. E., although once I got ordained I became a Reverend E.!

As a kid I also read Encyclopedia Brown and Nancy Drew mysteries.

I’d try to stay up late enough to at least watch the opening credits of my mom’s favorite show, *PBS Mystery!* with the cartoon woman crying over some calamity — “Oooh, oooh!” My brother and I would watch episodes of *Scooby-Doo!*, with Scooby, Shaggy, Fred, Daphne and Velma drawn into a mystery to solve, unmasking the villain who was usually pretending to be some spooky monster. ‘And I would have gotten away with it if it hadn’t of been for those meddling kids and that mangy mutt!’ Now, as a parent, I’ve let my children view *Blue’s Clues*, where three clues formulaically help solve a mystery; and after the kids are tucked in, I have binged on the BBC’s *Sherlock*.

Mysteries engage our desire to analyze and evaluate situations and to bring evil-doers to justice. They hold us in suspense, they draw us into the drama and allow us to become invested in the discovery of truth and to be set free by it. Mysteries require investigation — a word that means to track or to follow footsteps,

which makes sense, because the first investigators and detectives probably were hunters tracking down prey or mystery solvers before fingerprinting and DNA samples, who would at best find a set of footprints to follow. And so it is that a predominant symbol of mysteries is the magnifying glass, which allowed investigators to get a closer look at footprints or other clues in a mystery.

2.

Today we’re going to get out our magnifying glasses and be detectives on the trail of John’s Easter story.

Previously in John’s Gospel, the up and coming healer, teacher and prophet Jesus enters Jerusalem with his disciples trailing behind him. It’s just before the Passover festival and his disciples hope for a political and religious coup. But by Thursday evening, everything goes wrong. Judas betrays Jesus, his followers scatter in fear, Peter denies him three times while Herod and Pilate each isolate Jesus in their own interrogation rooms and grill him. They find him innocent of charges but the court of fickle public opinion persuades the leaders to have him put to death anyway. One mystery is who exactly to blame for Jesus’ wrongful death: Rome, the jealous and worried religious leaders, the crowds? Regardless, Jesus is forced to drag his cross from the city to its outskirts at Golgotha, and crucified just as Passover is about to officially get underway. Jesus dies like a Passover lamb that helps the people avert God’s wrath, that by Jewish tradition and by God’s mercy takes away the sins of the world. A few people quickly bury Jesus before sundown in a nearby garden.

And so we pick up the track the story after the Jewish sabbath, Saturday, is over, and it is early on the first day of the week. While it's still dark, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb by herself. Is she there to try and fix up the body like the woman in the other gospels? Does she come there, a Nancy Drew, with notebook and to investigate? Or just to mourn? It's like a horror movie or an episode of Scooby-Doo where the group splits up at the worst time possible. Mary, like Daphne and/or Velma, gets to the tomb and upon investigation finds good clue #1: the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Dun dun dun!

She scurries back to where the remaining eleven disciples are hiding out, with her teeth chattering from sadness and fear. "They've taken the Lord out and now the mystery is where they put the body!" Peter and the Beloved disciple run together like Shaggy and Scooby, seeing who can high tail it faster. Beloved gets there first but is scared to go in; Peter gets there a moment later, and decides to investigate, pulling out his magnifying glass to see that indeed Jesus is gone, but to find clue number 2, that the linen wrappings are rolled up nicely in the corner. Dun dun dun! It looks Jesus finished a two-night stay at a dingy motel and took a moment to tidy up before leaving. John says that Beloved believes in that moment, but it's a mystery what exactly he believes because he and Peter just go back to where they came from, leaving Mary Magdalene once again on her own, still lamenting the calamity of it all: "Ooooh, ooooh!"

While still crying, she decides to lean down and look in. Good clue 3: two people are seated in the tomb, dressed in white. They have a message for her, or to be more precise, a question: "Why are you weeping?" "Ooooh, ooooh!" she responds. "They have taken my

Lord away, and I have no clue where they put his body!" If she had not been interrupted, maybe she would have asked them to search the Billiard Room and Study, but instead, clue #3 is quickly followed by good clue #4: the "gardener" shows up. At which point Mary Magdalene seems to do a Velma and can't find her glasses, she has dropped her magnifying glass and just can't make out the face – which as John tells us in none other than Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" While squinting at this apparent stranger, Mary repeats her mystery of a body taken away, "tell me where you have put him!" Mary's cartoon feet are spinning but she's getting nowhere, she can't put together the clues right in front of her.

And so one final good clue: He says her name: "Mary." Ta-da! Bingo!

Suddenly the voice rings clearly, the face comes into focus, and I bet she can even smell him. The 'where have they laid his body?' mystery has been solved. Nowhere. Because he is alive! A new mystery: Resurrection?

3.

John's Easter story includes multiple levels of mystery. Besides the where is Jesus mystery, John also leads us to ask why Mary can't figure out this mystery sooner, why she can't seem to notice the clues for what they are, why she can't make out the evidence that a radical departure from the norm is taking place. Are her glasses, is her magnifying glass broke? Maybe. The primary answer though is right in front of our noses: the sting of grief. Mary isn't being ditzy or dense, she's being human in her grief. Her world is being distorted by the pain of her teacher's death. She like the other disciples, has defined herself as a follower of Jesus and after the crucifixion she has become aimless. Why did Jesus die? Why did God let

this happen? It hurts her inside. It stings worse than any wasp or burn. Even when Jesus' body is nowhere to be found she can't hear or see straight, she can't follow the good clues to the face of Christ in front of her.

We may approach Easter with a sting in our hearts. We have our own griefs and pains we each carry to this place, we each have tombs in our hearts that we haunt or that haunt us, that we keep coming back to. A death of a loved one at too young of an age. A regret that lingers. A relationship that ended without a clear explanation. Or one of life's other persistent riddles wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.ⁱ

We may be smarting with the sting of tragedy or a lack of direction, and now we have to contend with Easter bunnies, egg hunts, the official arrival of hopeful spring, and the shouts and horns of an Easter morning service? No thanks. Death is real and final, grief is real and unavoidable, all good things come to an end, they are fleeting. This sting leaves us near-sighted, not able to focus on anything outside of our own immediate needs. With death's or life's smart sting in our hearts, it may be that we [cover eyes] see no Easter, [cover ears] hear no Easter, [pause while covering mouth]...speak no Easter.

4.

But the Good News of today's reading however is that God's resurrection power cuts through death and its power to blind, deafen and silence us. The resurrection of Christ is the big reveal, but notice it's only implied in the story. John doesn't say, "Jesus got up, rolled up the cloths, rolled away the stone, and got out of the tomb." The good news then is that the good clues just start to pile up around Mary, until the conclusion within the story becomes as unavoidable as death, and is the opposite of

the premise that death is the final word. Jesus is standing right in front of Mary. Resurrection! Easter reveals God's undying love is real and rules over even the power of death! Jesus tells Mary, 'Go tell my brothers, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.' She runs back to them, again, and cuts to the chase: "I have seen the Lord!"

Through Jesus, God not only cuts through the power of death but also cuts through the sting that incapacitates Mary to detect the risen Christ. Sure, it practically takes Jesus asking, "Miss me?"ⁱⁱ to get her to sort it out, but it finally works. God was willing to dog Mary until she got it and experienced the risen Christ awaiting her.

The good news is that also that God is able not only to cut through the sting of death and sorrow but also that Mary Magdalene is there in the first place to experience it. Anna Carter Florence rightly emphasizes Mary's role in John's Gospel as both the first Christian witness and first Christian preacher, and the significance that it's a woman with those trailblazing jobs. And as this church celebrates it's 378th Easter since its founding and the first one with a settled female pastor, the Rev. Ashley Grant, we lift up all the ways that female interim pastors, female CE directors who became ordained clergy, and countless other females from this congregation have been witnesses and preachers here and elsewhere. But before Mary Magdalene is a witness to the risen Christ and a preacher, she is first an investigator, brave enough despite her sorrow over Jesus' death and fear that she, going out in the open, might get arrested for being a follower of Jesus, does go out there. To see for herself the place where his body lay. To go with her magnifying glass and get her close-up of the worst things out there. She perhaps foolishly rushes in where everyone but two

angels and the risen Jesus fear to tread. But because of her brave investigation, following the trail of Jesus, she sees the risen Lord first and gets to tell the new, new story of Jesus and his love.

5.

The Good News today is that God's resurrection power continues to make itself known in the world.

We never saw Jesus physically be resurrected from the grave, but God has set before us some pretty good clues.

I have heard the Lord in the voices of our young adults testify to the power of God to make their lives new, like our very own Megan McCaskill, who wrote a moving article on how God has been present in her life, especially while being a church camp counselor and mission trip participant.

I have smelled the Lord in the sweet aroma of funeral food, the embodied support and love of fellow Christians from this church for people in times of intense grief. Their food and emotional and religious support testifies, as H. Richard Niebuhr writes, that death is real but not final, that there is life eternal for those who are willing to receive God's grace now and forever.

I have seen the Lord work today through outreach leaders who give chunks of their lives to resettle families in need, get medical

equipment to the frail, assemble non-perishable food items to food insecure children.

I have heard the Lord call my name, "Adam, I am alive. Adam, I am with you. Adam, take up your magnifying glass and follow me."

We are magnifying glasses when we search for clues of Easter today around us. And we are magnifying glasses of the Lord, when like Mary the mother of Jesus did before Jesus was born, and like Mary Magdalene the disciples of Jesus did after he was resurrected, we sing God's praise, we serve each other in holy love, we testify to the power of God and the power of resurrection.

Today we return to the scene of Easter. Today we discover what has been tucked away in a corner of the tomb inside a little envelope. There God has written who, where, and how life and death have been turned upside down forever:

Jesus Christ, in our hearts, with the Resurrection.

The Resurrection is the answer of why we can live with hope in a broken world and yet it is also the great mystery of God's love that cannot be solved but can only be cherished and magnified in lives of faith. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Christ's Resurrection! Alleluia and Amen.

ⁱ Allusion half to Guy Noir and half to Winston Churchill.

ⁱⁱ This is an end of season (British "series") 3 *Sherlock* reference to Moriarty's "resurrection"