

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Easter Day
April 20, 2025
1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18
"The King Has One More Move"

"It was a dark and stormy night." If those were the first words you read in a new book, what would you expect the book to be about? Those words set a mood and an expectation that something bad is bound to happen. Which makes it curious that John begins the 20th chapter of his gospel with these words, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark" Reading those words, we would think that something awful is about to happen, but that is not the case, is it? John is not preparing us for the worst; he is depicting the mood of the disciples. It was a dark day in their lives. They were immersed in grief. They were drowning in a sea of hopelessness. They were buffeted by waves of despair. They were pulled downward by the undertow of depression. Truly, it was a dark morning.

We know about those dark mornings, don't we? Those days when our world spins out of control. Those dark days when relationships crumble, disease afflicts, defeat overwhelms, tragedy strikes, a career is derailed, an exam is failed, a friend is lost, or a family is split. We know about dark days, and can understand just how dark a day it was for the disciples and why John records this fact at the outset. We know the story of that morning so well - perhaps too well, to the point where we miss some important details.

We know that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other women were the first to see the empty tomb. But they were so locked in to their perception of reality that they didn't understand its significance. They weren't prepared to alter their view of reality, and so they assumed that someone had stolen the body. Isn't that what we do when we face dejection and depression? We are so certain that our perception of reality is accurate that we make all sorts of assumptions about our situation, other people's motives, and the hopelessness of it all. Often, we refuse to believe that any other possibilities exist. So, like Mary Magdalene and the other women, we assume the worst.

But Easter is not about our vision of reality. It is about God's vision of reality, which assumes not the worst, but promises the best. When we look at our world through the lens of Easter, we see things differently - an empty tomb is filled with hope - a disease offers opportunity for healing - the loss of a job brings new prospects - grief opens new levels of compassion - broken relationships are mended - defeat is resurrected into victory.

But that Easter perspective doesn't happen on its own. Easter faith flies in the face of conventional wisdom that says: when you're dead, you're dead; disease leads to death; unhappiness is sufficient reason for divorce; suffering serves no good purpose. Easter faith gives us a glimpse of the reality that God sees for us and our world.

Way back in the day, before cell phones and computers, a person could dial (in fact phones had dials on them!) 0 for Operator and get a live person to help with information. In that same era, the early versions of a refrigerator was really just an icebox – a large metal cabinet that cooled things with a big chunk of ice. With that in mind, there's a story told by Paul Mencken about his childhood experience with just such an operator, many decades ago.

"When I was quite young," Mr. Mencken begins, "my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked to it. Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she did not know. Information please could supply anybody's number and the correct time.

My first personal experience with this genie-in-the-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway - the telephone!

"Information Please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head. A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear. "Information." "I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience. "Isn't your mother home?" came the question. "Nobody's home but me," I blubbered. "Are you bleeding?" "No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts." "Can you open your icebox?" she asked. I said I could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger."

After that I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math, and she told me my pet chipmunk I had caught in the park just the day before would eat fruit and nuts. Then there was the time that Petey, our pet canary died. I called Information Please and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was un-consolated. Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers, feet up on the bottom of a cage? She must

have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow, I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone. "Information Please." "Information," said the now familiar voice. "How do you spell 'fix'?" I asked. All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. Then when I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. Without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information please." Miraculously, I heard again the small clear voice I knew so well, "Information." I hadn't planned this but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell 'fix'?" There was a long pause. Then came the soft-spoken answer, "I guess that your finger must have healed by now." I laughed. "So it's really still you?" I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time?" "I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children, and I used to look forward to your calls." I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister. "Please do, just ask for Sally."

Just three months later I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered information and I asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" "Yes, a very old friend." "Then I'm sorry to tell you.

Sally has been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago." But before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?" "Yes." "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down. Here it is. I'll read it to you: "Tell Paul I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean." I thanked her and hung up. I did know what Sally meant."

Easter faith calls us to look beyond what we think is the present reality to a new reality that only God can envision. We catch God's vision through a personal encounter with Him. That's what made the difference for Mary Magdalene. Until she heard her name spoken personally by Jesus, she had assumed that he was the gardener (see what lengths to which we will go to fit situations to our vision?) But when Jesus spoke her name, she came to her senses and caught the vision of the new reality God had in store for her. That's also how we catch the vision - through a personal encounter with Jesus. Easter tells us that there are limitless possibilities for us, that we can't even conceive, because we are too limited in our thinking. Easter affirms that God is never to be discounted or counted out.

One day, fifty years ago in London, a tour guide was leading a tour through an art museum when she came to a painting based on Goethe's story Faust. The painting showed

the devil, Mephistopheles, seated across a table from Faust, playing a game of chess. The title of the painting was "Checkmate." The guide stopped momentarily to give the tourists an opportunity to appreciate the work of art. Then the group moved on, except for one tourist who stayed in front of the painting, just staring at it.

The tour group had moved into another part of the museum, when, all of a sudden, they heard a great commotion behind them. Echoing down the hallways, came the voice of the lone tourist, who had remained to study the painting. He was shouting, "It's a lie! It's a lie!" The embarrassed guide rushed back to quiet the tourist, but he would not be calmed. He kept saying over and over, "It's a lie! It's a lie!" "What's a lie?" asked the guide. "The painting is a lie." "What do you mean" queried the guide?

The tourist looked her in the eye and said, "I am a Grand Master chess player. I have studied the board very carefully, and the title 'Checkmate,' is a lie. The king still has one more move that will enable him to win. The king still has one more move!"

That, my brothers and sisters is the essential message of Easter - The King still has one more move! Even when the devil thought that he had put an end to this "messiah thing," and had God checkmated, the king still had one more move. Even when the world thought God was out of options, the king still had one more move. The message is the same now as it was then.

The king still has one more move in our lives, too. Even when disease robs us of vitality and a long life, the king still has one more move! Even when we grieve over the loss of a loved one, the king still has one more move! Even when our career seems trashed, the king still has one more move! Even when our relationships appear on the verge of collapse, the king still has one more move! Even when we suffer through apparent defeat, the king still has one more move!

There are no obstacles large enough to prevent God from working out His next move in our lives. That's what and why we celebrate on Easter. It's not for the candy, eggs, chocolate and fluffy bunnies. We celebrate the promise of yet another move of God in our lives, no matter how dead-ended they appear. The king still has one more move! The King always has one more move!

Alleluia! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you

has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen