

What Are You Looking For?
John 20:1-9, Revelation 5
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 16, 2017 (Easter Early)
Pastor Dave Carver



Years ago I was privileged to journey to the rain forest of Peru. You won't be surprised to know that while there, I did some bird watching. This American's guide through the Peruvian forest was a Brazilian named Fino. That's important to know because he grew up speaking a local language, and then learned Portuguese, moved to a Spanish-speaking country, and was talking to me in English.

At any rate, we were walking through the underbrush and he got very excited. He pointed to a thicket and said, "There! Wow! I think it is an *araucuan*!" I know a few birds, but not everything... and I know I've never seen an araucuan before. I've never even heard of an araucuan before. It's cloudy and dark in the forest and he's over there taking photos and I can't see anything. "What color is it?" I say. "Brownish-gray." Yeah, that's not helping. I'm so eager to see this bird, and I can't find it at all... "How big is it?" I say. He replies – I kid you not – "Um, well, it's about... you know... araucuan sized." Um, yeah, thanks for that tip. For the record, I never saw the bird.

I tell that story this morning because the scripture passages for today both have a lot to do with people who are looking for something that winds up being in plain sight... and yet they can't recognize it to save their lives.



¹Our Gospel reading opens with Mary Magdalene starting a sad, yet mundane day.

The Three Marys, 1910

As the sun rose, she probably wouldn't say that she was actually *looking* for anything. She was going to the graveyard. She was making a visit. Paying her respects. Taking care of a little business. She had no intentions of engaging in a search...

Yet whatever she thought she was doing was suddenly interrupted by the discovery of the empty tomb. This routine visit to tie up a few loose ends now becomes a hunt for a missing corpse.

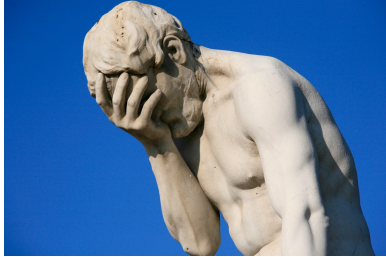
She recruits Peter and the other disciple and now everyone is engaged in the quest to find Jesus' dead body. When Matthew tells the story, he mentions that the religious leaders and Roman soldiers are looking for the body, too. On the other hand, in Luke, we read that some of Jesus' close friends thought it was a lost cause, and so they left Jerusalem and headed back to their homes in Emmaus.

And even though everybody would say that they were looking for Jesus, on that first Easter, none of the people who actually meet up with him recognize him because he did not fit the profile. They were all looking for a dead body, and the Jesus of Easter is most certainly not a corpse.



Flipping ahead to the book of Revelation, we find that John has been granted a vision of heaven. It's amazing! At the center of heaven is a circle of thrones, and in the midst of all these is a single, magnificent throne guarded by amazing creatures. Seated on the throne is an undescribed deity to whom songs and praises are offered; and in that One's hand is an ornate-looking scroll of immense importance. Except... the scroll is sealed. There in the midst of this heavenly perfection, John experiences frustration because there is no one who can be found who is worthy to unseal the scroll.

There, surrounded by all the power and majesty of God's eternal kingdom, John weeps bitterly because he realizes that none of his ideas is sufficient, all of his strength is not enough... there is no way to move forward, and he feels lost.



²There's not a person in this room who can't empathize with that. Each of us knows what it's like to be looking for something and feel utterly defeated because it cannot be found. Sometimes, it's something stupid like your glasses or your car keys, and you're angry or frustrated. Sometimes, it's your wallet, or even worse, your job that's been lost, and in addition to the anger and frustration there's a fear that asks, "What are we going to do now?" And sometimes, it's your health that's gone missing, or the life of a loved one, and to all of those other emotions you add the simple questions, "Why do I even bother? Is there anything for me?"

In both the Gospel and Revelation, the reality is that a whole new paradigm has to open up. As long as Mary insists on living in a world where resurrection is impossible, she'll never be able to see Jesus. As long as John continues to expect that the one who can open the scroll is someone who is basically like him, it will remain sealed.

You can't blame Mary or John for their inability to grasp this newness. Typically, we attempt to do what needs to be done using the methods we've always used. That saves time. It's straightforward.

But every now and then you get to a place where everything you've tried and everything you know how to do

² *Cain* by Henri Vidal, [Tuileries Garden](#), Paris, 1896

just isn't enough. You keep working on something in the only way you know how, and nothing changes.



Psychologist Abraham Maslow coined what has come to be known as “The Law of the Instrument” when he said, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”³ Mary and John

couldn't recognize the new reality confronting them because they were limited by the tools they'd carried with them their entire lives.

When Mary went to the grave, and when the apostles were looking for Jesus, and even when John was in the council of heaven – they faced a loss or a challenge that was quite simply beyond their imagining. And because the difficulty was unimaginable, the remedy was equally inconceivable. If the only tool you have ever seen is a hammer, and all of a sudden you are confronted with a wall of screws, nuts, and bolts... what can you do? You don't even know that you don't know how to make them work!

In the Harry Potter novels, there's a section of Hogwarts School called “the Room of Requirement”. In many ways, it's a totally awesome place that saves a number of plans from going awry. Here's how it works: when you really, really need something, you simply go and stand outside this room and say what you need three times. Finals coming up and you can't find a quiet place? Simply walk up and down the corridor and repeat three times, “I really need a place to study.” Immediately the door opens and you're welcomed into a well-appointed study carrel.

It would be great to have a room like that – provided that you already know what you need. The problem is, of

³ Abraham H. Maslow (1966). *The Psychology of Science*. p. 15.

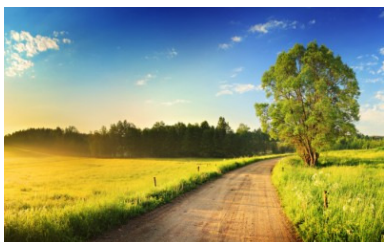
course, that sometimes we don't know what we need at all! There have been many, many instances in my own life where the "Room of Requirement" would have been useless, because the problem is so novel that I've got no idea what to do to fix it. If the only tool I've ever seen is a hammer, how can I *imagine* a screwdriver or a wrench? We can't benefit from that of which we are unable to conceive.

When the Gospel was read, did you hear that verse that mentioned the fact that Mary and the two disciples couldn't find the body, and then one of them said, "Of *course* we can't find Jesus' body! He had to rise from the dead, remember?"

There's no way you can remember that verse because nobody but Jesus and the angels ever says that in the Bible. No one else is able to begin to think of resurrection even as a possibility – it must have sounded like so much foolishness to them.

John, from his vantage point in heaven, weeps because no one can be found to open the scroll. And then, the unimaginable occurs. There's a creature... it's a lion... it's a lamb... it's so mystifying that it defies description. When it appears, the heavenly council learns a new song of praise – one that is quickly learned by all in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.

And what occasions this new song? The unimaginable, indescribable, inconceivable Christ. He altered history, he changed our experience of time, and he brought forth the healing of eternity.



Today is Easter. It's the best day of all days for us to embrace the newness of life and to celebrate what is and what can be – even when it's inconceivable to us.

We've been given a whole bag of hammers. And lots of times, those hammers have been what has gotten us through the tight squeezes in which we've found ourselves. But sooner or later, we need more than hammers.

Ask God to enlarge your possibilities. You don't have to do what you've always done. Pray for new life and new growth to show up in surprising places. Ask God for new opportunities to walk in faith. That's what resurrection living is all about – being open to the “what is” rising up from the ashes of “what used to be”. Sometimes God will change our situations – and, to be honest, that's what we usually want. But sometimes God will change us.

When I was 21 years old I was leaving a worship service at college. The topic was “God's will for your life”, and the speaker invited us to be tuned in to where God was leading us. I remember saying, “Listen, God can lead me wherever he wants... as long as he doesn't expect me to live in Pittsburgh. There is no way I can be happy in Pittsburgh.”

Uh-huh. That was 35 years ago, if you're not so good at math. I had said, “My reality is wrapped in an inability to be happy in Pittsburgh.” God said, “Welcome to the Steel City.” Either I was going to be miserable – or I was going to have to learn a new way to respond.



No matter where you go, there you are. You are a widow or a graduate; alone or wrapped in a giant family; you are way behind on your bills or you are getting by... And some of you are in places you did not choose and for which you never wished.

On any given day, God may change your situation. Or God may change you. Ask God for resurrection – for new

possibilities that will help you find what you didn't know you were looking for. It's what he does!