**“The Golden Egg”**

An Easter Sermon by

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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Raise your hands please if you have ever, in your life, been on an Easter Egg hunt. Now, raise your hands if you have been on an Easter Egg hunt today? Now, here’s the last one. Raise your hands if you have ever found a Golden Egg on an Easter Egg hunt? Wow. Very impressive. You can put your hands down.

I want to tell you about an Easter Egg hunt I went on when I was probably about nine or ten years old. I grew up in a city, so most years Easter egg hunts were confined to the living room, or perhaps the small patch of grass in our backyard, probably the size of this altar platform. Not particularly challenging.

One Easter however, we were invited to some friends who lived out in the country. They had what seemed to me to be an unending amount of land with trees and shrubs and tall grass and fallen logs, even a little creek with a bridge over it. And of course, there was going to be an egg hunt. Now this was going to be a challenge, I thought, but I was totally up for it. To make the deal even sweeter, we were told that out there somewhere, among all the regular eggs, was also hiding, a Golden Egg. And if we were the one to find the Golden Egg, there was a special prize awaiting us at the end. I had my mission. No frilly basket with fake green grass in it for me. I was after just one thing. I was going to find that Golden Egg.

Now, here’s where I made my fatal mistake. I assumed that the Golden Egg, being so special and unique, wouldn’t just be different from the other eggs in color, but also in size. I figured it must be at least the size of a football, maybe even larger. I hoped I would be strong enough to carry it back. I think, perhaps, I’d been watching that scene from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, with the geese who lay the giant Golden Eggs, and in my mind, that’s what I was expecting, and so that’s what I went looking for.

And alas, when hunt ended three hours later, I didn’t find it. Turns out, that was because the real golden egg wasn’t any larger than all the other eggs. This was a problem for me because I’d stopped looking in places smaller than an oversized football could fit, such as, for example, wedged into a stone at the base of the little footbridge over the dried up creek. To make matters even worse, the egg really wasn’t even all that golden. I think it was a yellow egg someone had spray painted with some copper paint they had lying around. Not nearly as dazzling or amazing as I’d expected. I began to feel the whole situation was unfair. I’d been cheated. There were tears. I think I ended up in a time out.

My tears on that Easter day had very little in common with Mary Magdalene’s tears on that first Easter morning, except that we were both frustrated that we couldn’t find what we were looking for. Just as the Golden Egg had eluded me, so too, Jesus was eluding Mary on that first Easter morning. And actually for kind of the same reason. She was looking for Jesus, but the Jesus she thought she was looking for wasn’t the Jesus who was out there. She thought she was looking for a dead body in a tomb, a place of cold unchanging death, not a living being in a garden, a place of transformation and growth. So when Mary sees Jesus, the very thing she is searching for, she can’t even recognize him. For in her mind Jesus is dead; this couldn’t possibly be him. It’s the last thing she’s expecting.

Now, Jesus had told his closest friends, like Mary, that he would die and three days later rise again, but he hadn’t told them much about exactly what he would look like after his rising – or how they would recognize that it had happened. Perhaps this is why Mary gets confused and thinks he’s the gardener. Perhaps she’s expecting that the Risen Christ, if indeed he had risen like he promised, will be some dazzling figure, floating above the earth with a kind of effervescent glow – completely transformed from the Jesus she had known, learned from, loved, and followed for the past three years. And that’s why she didn’t recognize him at first. Perhaps what she was expecting the Risen Christ to be like was far grander and far more magnificent that simply a gardener tending to the slow, gentle work of cultivating growth and new life.

And you know, I think sometimes, when it comes to our own searching for God, we fall into this same trap. We get discouraged or frustrated in our faith because we think that God is absent from our lives or the life of the world. Either we think of God as basically dead, a part of the past that can maybe offer us life lessons, but not real abiding presence. Or we think of God as supremely exulted, glorified up to heavenly places so high and grand that are inaccessible to us, at least in this life. But the meaning of Easter is that God is more than just the God of the distant past, and more than just the God of the eternal future. Sometimes we forget that the Risen Christ didn’t rise from death up to heaven, he rose from death back to life on earth – to be with the people he loved the most. And so the meaning of Christ’s Rising is that our God is first and foremost the God of the living, the present, the here and now in every age – engaged in our world, in our lives, and in our hearts.

And just as with Mary, so often the Risen Christ appears to us in ways that are profoundly different than what we expect – and it just takes a little while for our eyes to adjust …or maybe it’s our hearts that need to adjust, before we realize that we’re actually in the presence of the Risen Christ, and not just, a good friend, or a homeless stranger, or, perhaps, a gardener.

The point is that the Risen Christ looks different to each one of us – and we’re in good company in that. Even the four Gospels described quite different experiences of Jesus appearing after his death. We just heard John’s account of Jesus’ first appearing. In Luke, he vanishes and reappears in various places, almost like a magician. In Matthew, he’s more subject to the constraints of physics. And in Mark, well, let’s just say, the Risen Christ in Mark appears in the sharing of the story by those who read and tell the story of Christ, as we’re doing here this morning. Since encountering Jesus is different for each person, if don’t know quite what to expect, you’re probably on the right track. Keeping your heart and your eyes open to being surprised by Jesus, as Mary was in the Garden, is probably the only way to really come into the presence of the Risen Christ.

I can’t tell you what the Risen Christ will look like exactly in your life. You’ll have to stumble upon him for yourself. But I can tell you, with joy, what he looks like in mine, because it turns out, the Risen Christ appears in my life all the time. Sometimes he appears in the form of another person, who shows up at just the right moment with a simple word of compassion or empathy that re-centers me when I’m in the midst of a difficult struggle and starting to spiral into despair. Sometimes he appears in my heart as a feeling of confidence that my own commitment to faith and to the spiritual life has meaning and the power to bring healing into the world. Sometimes, I think I see him appearing in the lives of people I know who have made radical changes in how they live – by embracing more fully the holiness of their daily lives, or by conquering addictions or other destructive patterns of behavior, or by coming to live more sustainably with the earth. Sometimes I see him in the face of people who are suffering, inviting me into new relationships for their healing and my own.

How will the Living Christ appear in your life and in the life of the world this Easter? I have no idea. But I know he will, and, most likely it will be in a way far different than whatever it is you expect. And, like Mary, eventually your eyes and heart will adjust to recognize Jesus’ presence in the regular, humble corners of the garden that is your life. You’ll find it wherever you see suffering and death transforming into new life and possibility; wherever you see sadness and despair being rekindled into hope; wherever you see betrayal and rejection giving way to forgiveness, compassion and redemption. In each of these places, seeds of new life are being tended, watered and nourished into being, thanks to Jesus, the mysterious gardener and Risen Christ. Alleluia! Amen.