

“From Stuck to Unstuck”

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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John 20:1–18

Have you ever gotten stuck?

Sure, if you drive a car in these parts, you probably have, at least once. (Although, with weather such as we’ve been having, we don’t think of it much.) For me, it’s happened twice since I moved back to New York from Texas. It’s not my driving; it can’t be. No, the problem must be my little car (which I affectionately call “my upholstered roller-skate”). The poor thing just isn’t built for snow. So, it’s gotten stuck a few times. Once stuck, it’s not all that easy to get unstuck. The inclination (I admit it) is to rev it harder. But that just slicks up the snow underneath, turning it into a sheet of ice that laughs at your tires’ pleas for traction. Very often, the way to get out is with help. Someone has to help you out. They push you out. Or they tow you out.

One thing is sure: to go from stuck to unstuck will not happen by doing the same old things; it requires something new: a different effort, a change in plan, a helping hand from outside. Going from stuck to unstuck is often found in a willingness to let go of past inclinations, and to grab on to new possibilities.

Mary was stuck.

No, it hadn’t been snowing. And obviously, she had no car.

Mary was stuck, as were most of her friends, because of the terrible thing that had happened. Jesus — her master, her teacher, her rabbi — was dead, executed by the powerful and privileged in a quasi-religious lynching. She had seen him die. From a distance, a reasonably safe distance, she watched him writhe in pain on the Roman instrument of execution, and she watched him as he breathed his last.

The sight of this had branded her memory and seared her mind. She loved Jesus:

his teaching,
his guidance,
his compassion,
his care —

and now he was gone, taken from her and her friends, taken from her before her eyes.

And now she was stuck: stuck with the memory, stuck with the pain, stuck with the awful realization that the happy days of listening to him, learning from him, following him, these were all gone.

All she could do, at this point, was to remain with the sorrow for a while, to mourn Jesus as best she could. It was how she could honor him, he who had shown her such undeserved honor; it was what she could give to him, he who had given her so much.

And — well, there's no way around it, she might as well be honest with herself — it was what little connection she had to the past, a past that meant so much to her, a past that included him.

So she made her way down to the place of Jesus' burial, to that tomb a quiet benefactor had provided for his body. She wasn't sure what to expect there — solace, perhaps; or maybe a recollection of the life that once was.

What she found there was not at all what she'd expected to find. No, she found there things that shattered her expectations: the tomb open, the body missing.

After letting the word out that things were wrong, all wrong, she returned to the garden near the tomb, where she could be alone in her thoughts and in her weeping. She went to the tomb, and what she saw did not make sense to her: two figures in white, sitting where her rabbi's body was supposed to be. And then she saw another person (she supposed he was the gardener) outside the tomb.

She didn't know it was *him*. For she was stuck: stuck in sorrow, her mind seared by the sight of his suffering and dying. She did not recognize *Jesus* right away.

And so it was that day at first. We think that we modern people are unique in our difficulties understanding the resurrection. I tell you, let's not flatter ourselves: it was hardly different that day. On the very day of its occurring, the resurrection was surrounded by confusion and incomprehension. To those who should have known him, Mary first among them, Jesus was not immediately known.

Some of this, to be sure, is due to *expectation*: Mary simply did not expect Jesus to be there. Her sorrow, her memory of his suffering and death, had molded her expectations in a way that simply did not permit her to see him, at first.

Besides that, it seems that this resurrected Jesus was somehow different. He was truly Jesus, to be sure, the same Jesus she had known. And yet he was different, altered, transformed by his transition from death to life. And so it was that Mary, and several others who likewise loved him, did not recognize him, at first.

That's how it was with Mary. At first, she did not recognize him, even though she loved him; at first, she did not realize it was him, even though he meant more to her than anyone else. It took, not seeing him, but hearing him for the recognition to come alive and bloom in her. And when it did, her response was natural, her inclination understandable: "My teacher," she cried.

That's right: "My teacher." "*Rabbouni*." "My rabbi." She finally, by his word, had recognized him. And she was filled with joy.

But this was not the end of things. All was not settled. For even though there was recognition in her words, those same words show that she was still stuck. For in saying this — "My teacher" — she showed that she was still living out of her old expectations. For Jesus, sure, had been her teacher, her rabbi. And, in a sense, I suppose he still was. But now, he was much more than that. His present, even as it connected with his past, could not be contained by it, nor could that past constrain his future progress. His return to life did not mark merely a resumption of bygone days, a continuation of old ways; rather it meant a fulfilling, a raising up, a resurrecting of them.

For this reason, Jesus' reply to Mary's natural and understandable reaction was this: "do not hold on to me." That's right. "Do not hold on to me."

Doesn't that sound odd? What's Jesus telling Mary? Did Jesus have some phobia about germs? Was he sore following his crucifixion? Did he feel Mary was invading his personal space?

None of the above. When Jesus tells Mary, "do not hold on to me," he shows that he recognizes Mary's foremost desire at that moment: *to go back*. That's right. Mary wanted to go back, to the way things were. But that was not going to happen. And this is why, a very important "why": *Jesus' resurrection is not a restoration of the past. It is the opening of a new and glorious future.*

Mary wanted to hold on to Jesus. She wanted to cling to the past. The past was nice. It was comfortable. There was so much there that was good and right. Why should she not want to cling to the past? What was so wrong about being stuck there?

But God's plan was more than the past. God's plan was something brand new. It was a plan that took that whole sweep of events — from heartbreak through joy, embracing both the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and his being lifted up from the tomb — and made these the joyful declaration of God's surprising new way in the world.

Mary had wanted to hold on, and in holding on, to go back. But with the risen Jesus, there is no going back, there is no clinging to the past.

There is either merely the shadowy memories of events which one can never relive,
or there is joyful participation in the all-things-new of Jesus, he who wishes to share *his* reality.

There is either understanding the *present* through the cloudy spectacles of the *past*, which is no true understanding, concealing as much as it reveals;
or there is understanding the *past* through the clear lens of the *present*, the Lord's present, the high and lifted up "Now" declared by the Son of God,

he who is alive,
renewed,
resurrected,
completed,
glorified.

Mary had wanted to hold on, for she was stuck. But then, with a mere word from her Lord, she became unstuck. She no longer saw the present through the past; she saw the past through the present. No longer desiring to cling to the past, she was released for the present and prepared for the future.

So, where are we? Are we stuck? Or have we been made unstuck?

Do we cling to a past that, although comfortable and familiar, nevertheless binds us? Or do we embrace, just as we have been embraced by, the *Now* of the Risen Jesus?

Do we approach him by our preconceived notions of what is “possible,” by our memories of the past (whether they be healthy or horrifying), by our own limited experiences . . . and thereby fail to recognize him? Or do we welcome his transforming of those experiences by his presence, his reality, his risen glory, . . . and thereby come to know the One by whom we are fully known?

You see, *this* is the central fact of Easter: Jesus is alive, and for that reason he is new life.

Yes, Jesus is new life: the embracing of our past and the declaration of our future, the forgiving of our past and the forging of our future.

Jesus is new life: the answer to our troubling questions and the question to our smug answers.

Jesus is new life — because he is alive, because he was not bound by death, because he has power over life and death, because he has the power to give us life.

My friends, he is the one who points the way, who *is* the way: from stuck, to unstuck.

Will you accept his direction?

Will you accept his help?

Will you accept *him*?