

“Married To Amazement”

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Easter, April 1, 2018
based on John 20:1-18*

In my time as a deliverer of sermons there has been no person more quoted by those of us in the craft (no matter our denomination) than a fellow Presbyterian minister, Frederick Bueckner. I have quoted him many times, but I don't believe I have shared what is said to be his most beloved personal story. Here it is:

A year or so ago, a friend of mine died. One morning in his sixty-eighth year he simply didn't wake up. It was about as easy a way as he could possibly have done it, but it was not easy for the people he left behind because it gave us no chance to start getting used to the idea ... or to say goodbye. He died in March, and in May my wife and I were staying with his widow overnight when I had a short dream about him.

I dreamed he was standing there in the dark guest room where we were asleep, looking very much himself in the navy-blue jersey sweater and white slacks he often wore. I told him how glad I was to see him again. He acknowledged that somehow.

Then I said, "Are you really there, Dudley?" I meant was he really there in fact, in truth, or was I merely dreaming he was. His answer was that he was really there. "Can you prove it?" I asked him. "Of course," he said. Then he plucked a strand of wool out of his jersey and tossed it to me. I caught it between my thumb and forefinger, and the feel of it was so palpably real that it woke me up. That's all there was to it. It was as if he had come on purpose to do what he'd done and then left.

I told the dream at breakfast the next morning, and I'd hardly finished when my wife spoke. She said that she'd seen the strand on the carpet as she was getting dressed. She was sure it hadn't been there the night before. I rushed upstairs to see for myself, and there it was -- a little tangle of navy-blue wool.

What do you make of a story like that? Do you brush it off. . .? It's easy to.

Madeline L'Engle, the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, died very recently. She once said, "Sometimes I just know that I am going to come down with an attack of atheism again. It's like the flu. *Spiritual flu*, I call it. I get ready to endure three or four days of doubts and deep distance from God. Then through the grace of God, I find myself spiritually well again."

Most of us, truth be told, live somewhere between moments of spiritual light and the spiritual flu. But, really, I think, what this brand of doubting is truly about is not atheism, so much, as an existential angst. It's not about God – it's really about us. I mean, tell me if this isn't true: what we're truly concerned about is -- what will happen to us when we die. What we want to know is this: Is there an Easter for me? Or, as in the case of those we love so much who die – especially those who die prematurely, is there an Easter for our beloved ones?

Now, let me go a step further. When someone dies prematurely, when life is taken from them at a time when there is so much life still to be lived, one of the primary things that we mourn and grieve is not just the loss of their life, but also the memories that did not happen – we grieve for what we will not get to experience together. You know -- that our father will not get to hold his grandchildren, or that we will not be able to share a wedding day together, or a graduation day, or that we will not be able to help someone we love mend a broken heart.

I once presided over the funeral of a young woman who was estranged from her parents at the time of her death – they had never reconciled. What her parents mourned that day at the church was not just the loss of their daughter, but also the loss of a chance to reconcile with her here on this earth -- the loss of their ability to say “I am sorry,” and, “Forgive us, please,” and, “I love you.” In many ways, those are the hardest things to grieve - those things that will never happen – the loss of possibility; of hope.

It is this type of grief that I believe Mary Magdalene was dealing with on that first Easter morning when she walked alone to Jesus’ tomb – she was not just going to look after the body of a friend, her teacher – she was going to that grave to bury the dead future he had helped her imagine, to lay to rest their dead vision of the way things might have been. She was going there to grieve for her lost hope – what else could she do? Mary thought the story was over.

Again, this is the greatest grief of all – the grief of a hope that was lost – having a picture in your mind of what might be, and then having that picture taken away from you completely.

Once every month Hilary, our children’s minister, and I meet with over a hundred of our Wasatch Preschool children in this room for something we call, “*Chapel Time*.” It’s only 15 minutes, but I always look forward to it because the children are so fresh from God.

Anyway, about two years ago, one of the classrooms arrived before any of the others, and one little boy, a four-year-old, and I were talking about this window over here in which Jesus is praying – and looking at it, he kind of shook his head and said with deep earnestness, “Jesus ... is *always* dying.” I thought then and still think, it was one of the most profound theological statements I’ve ever heard in my life. It’s why people wear crosses, I guess, and why they are the focal point of most churches.

The bright colors and joy of Easter do not cancel the pain of the cross – we do not skip the cross and proceed directly to Easter. Every year we painfully trudge through the same story of Jesus’s execution. We do this year after year, because Easter only makes sense in the context of the cross, just as a punch line only makes sense in the context of the whole April Fool’s joke.

The crucifixion and Easter are two separate events, but they are also two parts of the same story. Essentially, they are two parts of THE essential Biblical story.

You see, Easter is the story about how God keeps seeking us, in spite of us. Even in death. Maybe especially in death.

We killed the love of God in bodily form, tortured it, mocked it, hung in on the cross and said, 'we don't need it.' But that did not stop God from seeking us. God is not done with us yet – this is the story of resurrection.

Now, of course, this can't be proved. But, you know, it has been said down the ages that nothing really worth proving can truly be proved, nor disproved. That's certainly the case with "God" things.

I like how the late William Sloan Coffin put the conundrum of life beyond this one –

He said, "As a child in a womb cannot conceive of life with air and light – the very stuff of our existence – so it is hard for us to conceive of any other life without the sustaining forces to which we are accustomed.

But consider this: If we are essentially spirit, not flesh, if what is substantial about us is actually intangible; if we are spirits that have bodies and not the other way around, then it makes sense that just as musicians can abandon their instruments to find other ones elsewhere, so at death our spirits can leave our bodies and find other forms in which to make new music."

I once quoted him in another sermon about the subject of death where he said, "Without death we'd never live. Life without death would be interminable—literally. We'd take days to get out of bed, weeks to decide 'what's next?' Students would never graduate; faculty meetings and other gatherings would go on for months. Chances are we'd be bored to death."

He said those words in the context of his own nearing demise. He'd had several serious strokes, but his mind was as clear as ever. He told, also, of a seventy-five-year-old man whose broker called him to say that he had bought some stock that in five years would make him a millionaire. "Five years!" exclaimed the man. "I don't even buy green bananas anymore."

Coffin's own *Credo* on the subject was simple and elegant: "Before every birth and after every death there is still God. The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death. If we don't know WHAT is beyond the grave, we do know WHO is beyond the grave."

Okay, I like all of that, but I don't want to rush us too quickly to some pat answer that sounds nice for five minutes, but won't last. The richness of the Bible accounts on this has to do with the fact that they are never glib about matters of death, or matters of hope.

In his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner (who I quoted to begin this sermon) reflects on Jesus' last supper with his disciples and our own last supper with our dear ones one day. It was the day before Jesus died. The day, Buechner says, Jesus knew he was going to die soon. Sitting at that table, Peter asked, "Lord, where are you going?" The question within that question, Buechner says is, "Are you going anywhere at all or just out like a light?" That is our question about him and about ourselves. Did Jesus' life run out? Do you and I run out?

Jesus' answer to Peter's question "Where are you going?" was very personal – very poignant: "Let not your heart be troubled," he said, "I go to prepare a place for you. . . . In my Father's house are many rooms."

And then Buechner tells a remarkable story about his only brother, Jamie's death, and how one day he missed him so much he decided to call up his empty New York apartment. "I knew there wasn't anybody there," he said, "but who could say that at least some echo of him might be there, the sound of his voice, his marvelous laugh. So I sat there in the Vermont sunshine—this skeptical old believer that I am, this believing old skeptic who you would have thought had better sense—and I let the phone ring; just let it ring."

Jamie didn't answer it, of course. Buechner, the believing skeptic, chooses his words here with great care: "Yet, who knows? Who can ever know anything for sure about the mystery of things? 'In my Father's house are many rooms,' Jesus said, and I would bet my bottom dollar that in one of those many rooms that phone rang and rang and was heard. I believe that in some sense my brother's voice was in that ringing and that Jesus' voice was in it too."

Buechner concludes: "Jesus says he is not going out like a light. He says he is going on. He says he is going ahead. He says **we** will go there too when our time comes."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant minister, was jailed in 1944 by the Nazis for taking part in a plot to kill Hitler. Many of his letters and papers from prison have been preserved and collected. Shortly before his execution in the last days of the war he had something to say concerning his probable execution, something to say about the planet he would soon be leaving behind.

Was it, "Thank God I'll soon be clear of this miserable world?" You might think so, having seen all the suffering he had seen; having to endure the excruciating torture of waiting for his own inevitable execution. No, he said this instead:

"It is only when one loves life AND THE EARTH so much that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world" (Letters and Papers from Prison).

He is saying that the very signs of goodness and God's grace that are shot through this creation give one hope of resurrection and a new world that might exist beyond this one; that the closest thing to a proof for God are things like truth and beauty and courage and stories of undying love.

And to people who are glib, unthinking believers, he is saying that if you don't find signs of God and goodness here, you surely won't have eyes to see them any place else, so don't bother packing for it.

Think of the overwhelming love of Fredrick Bueckner that led him to phone his dead brother's apartment. That earthly love was like a finger pointing at a full moon.

Many years ago, I asked the most spiritual man I've ever known, a man named Jim Ligouri, what he thought of death and what might come after. His comment was to say that he spent just as much time wondering about his birth. That's an equal mystery," he said. "Where did I come from?" he wondered.

That was a revelation to me – it was something that prompted me to think larger thoughts about these ultimate questions.

The Bible . . . refuses to approach resurrection as a rational kind of thing at all. It approaches it as mystical. It's based not on our belief in God as much as God's belief in us, and on God's investment in the creation. It is based on our origin in God. It is based on our notion of God as a being as interested in the intrinsic wonder of our bodies as in our spirits.

Finally, it means that we need not worry about where we will go, because of who promises to be with us, always and forever; because, in some sense, the most important relationship we have here is the one we can have with the creator who made this world so beautiful, and fills us with such love for it sometimes, that we can't bear the thought of leaving it.

The wonderful poet, Mary Oliver, put every little and big thing I've spoken of this morning into one short little poem. It's called . . .

"When Death Comes."

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore, I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,

and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

Amen