

“The Lord is Risen!”

John 20:1-18

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Easter Sunday, April 1st, 2018
Matt Matthews

John 20:1-18

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The LORD is risen/The LORD is risen, indeed.

The PBS television show “Call the Midwife,” produced by the BBC, follows a group of nurse midwives through their daily chores of saving lives and birthing babies in London’s East End in the late 1950s and 60s. The critically acclaimed show is based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth who was a midwife with the Anglican Community of St. John the Divine. The TV nuns and nurses live in a convent named after the patron saint of childbirth, Nonnatus.

There’s hardly an issue, medical or otherwise, that the program doesn’t broach, from Cold War fears of nuclear war to the thalidomide scandal. The show tackles poverty, miscarriage, wanted pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies, surprise pregnancies, planned pregnancies, myriad complicated pregnancies; single motherhood, every manner of illness and disease, prostitution, religion and faith, racism and prejudice, alcoholism, disability, mental retardation, homosexuality, maternal love, paternal love, romantic love.

It’s a soap opera, of sorts, and it’s flawed with more than a few moments in each episode when the music swells too dramatically and the actors get goo-goo-eyed and say schmaltzy one-liners or give each other sappy, knowing looks. But I like the show, partly because it deals artfully and directly with the ups and downs of being human, and partly because I’ve come to care for the characters.

Sister Monica Joan is one of them. Nudging into her mid-eighties, she is losing her memory, and as Dylan Thomas wrote, she rages against the dimming of her once-formidable powers. She is a sight to behold in her formal nun’s habit, even though her all too familiar fading away is heartbreaking to watch. Her faith and trust in God verily light up the dark night that is swallowing her. The younger nurses are getting broken in, weeping over failures, trembling as they face their fears. The nuns sing their prayers at night. The nurses and nuns soldier on when the electricity goes out and it gets cold, when they are exhausted from working long hours, when the world’s suffering multiplied by the community’s poverty weighs them heavily, darkly down.

The convent is located in an abjectly poor neighborhood, and the likeable nurses visit folk in rundown apartments on both sides of every street, by the docks, and up and down the back stairs of every squalid alley. They are gifted healers who at once are vulnerable and brave. I like their spunk. I like how they often struggle with faith.

Last week's episode follows Nurse Crane as she calls on the Gelins. Ruth Gelin is ill with lung disease, failing fast, and while she and her husband act as if everything is okay, Nurse Crane knows Ruth Gelin is dying. Arnold Gelin, a retired baker, busies himself pulling cheese cakes and pies from the oven, while Ruth Gelin weakens, hides her pain, and, finally, slips into a coma.

The doctor asks Mr. Gelin if he is getting support from the synagogue of which he is a member. No. Arnold Gelin has grown distant from the community, he admits; he pays his dues but he doesn't attend. It's a stretch to get there, and it's the distance in his head that is the real problem. His religion has become lifeless. He faith has stopped working. God has become impossibly far away.

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Gelin is dying, the brusque police sergeant is serving up an eviction notice. The whole neighborhood is being demolished to make way for new housing and the Gelins are the only ones on the whole block who have yet to move out. Nurse Crane, in no uncertain terms, tells the copper to back off or else; this elderly couple won't leave until Mrs. Gelin does so in a coffin. It will only take a few more days. And no one would cross Nurse Crane. (This stuff is more exciting than March Madness basketball!)

With less than three minutes left in the episode, Ruth Gelin dies. Men in the synagogue gather in the street dressed in black, as is the custom of that community, singing their prayers, leading Arnold Gelin and his grown daughter to the funeral.

Days later Arnold Gelin brings a gift to Nurse Crane at the convent. It's a strudel. It is the last delicacy from his old oven, before he moves away to live with his daughter and her family. Nothing could say "thank you" better than his hot, perfectly baked strudel.

With less than ninety-seconds left in the episode, the next scene shows the solitary Nurse Crane carefully cutting the strudel in half. The next scene cuts to the police station where she delivers half of the strudel to the mean police sergeant who wasn't really mean, but was just doing his difficult job in a difficult world in which vulnerable people are evicted from their homes. Nurse Crane's gift is a little something sweet on a cold afternoon in a bitter world.

Call the Midwife airs on Sunday nights.

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You might be thinking, why isn't the preacher preaching about Jesus? Did I accidentally end up at the Art Theatre? Did I take a wrong turn? Are we getting ready for a movie about nurses? Why isn't the preacher preaching about Jesus? After all, this is Easter.

I have been. I have been preaching about Jesus.

Jesus is present when people reach out to one another in love. Jesus is present when busy people actually take the time to listen to one another. Jesus is present when people work to mend broken relationships. Jesus is present when people widen their circle of care to include others on the outside. Jesus is present when sick people are comforted. Jesus is present when right prevails over wrong. Jesus is present when the lonely are visited.

When we learn each other's name, when we treat every person with care, when we accord everyone respect, when we show mercy and kindness—when we do such things, we bear Christ to one another. We

welcome Christ in our midst. We honor Christ by living like he lived. And, there, the risen Christ is present. The living Christ is there. *Right there.*

Mary had come to the tomb all alone. God felt far away. Her body must have ached from what she had seen on that cross. Her head was reeling. Jesus came to her in that garden, at that tomb, on that chilly, early morning. And Jesus uttered her name.

Jesus has been meeting us at graveyards, and sickbeds, and convents, and playgrounds, and police stations, and Art Theatres, and Sunday churches ever since his resurrection. Through the hands of a nurse midwife, Jesus may offer a cool cloth for a fevered brow. Through the energy of a friendly, gangly 12-year-old, Jesus may hold the other end of a jump rope. Jesus may even deliver half of a homemade strudel.

However it happens, Jesus always shows up.

And the Risen Christ *always* knows our name.

The LORD is risen/**The LORD is risen, indeed.**

Alleluia, AMEN!