

The Last Word
A Sermon by Jeffrey P Carlson
St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago
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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Even before the crack of dawn, she's out walking in the streets of Jerusalem, early on Sunday morning.

I do not often get up before dawn on Sunday morning, but I'm usually on one of the first Brown Line trains of the morning when I come to church. Since we've moved downtown by Union Station, Sunday morning is my favorite time to walk through the Loop and catch the train. I cross the river on the Adams Street Bridge going toward the Quincy stop, but unlike the mayhem of a weekday morning, on Sunday the streets are quiet, deserted and peaceful.

It reminds me of the opening scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, when Audrey Hepburn, playing Holly Golightly, walks down an empty Manhattan canyon early on a Sunday morning, drinking coffee, set to music by *Moon River*. She has been out all night on a date in her quest to find a wealthy husband. We find out later in the movie that Holly Golightly is afraid of real love, so she immerses herself in superficial relationships. She's afraid of love because she knows that love means taking the risk of being vulnerable, even the vulnerability of loving a cat, and so she makes one last stop on her way home to window shop at Tiffany's to be distracted by shiny substitutes for real love.

On Sunday morning in Chicago, the Loop is empty, the Brown Line trains are nearly empty, and the people riding the 'L' at that time of the week are a motley crew: there are Holly Golightlys who have not spent the night in their own beds, people who are hung-over and disheveled and not looking nearly as glamorous as Audrey Hepburn; there are Club Kids who have been out dancing all night; clean cut Moody Bible kids, who have not been out all night, on their way to teach Sunday School somewhere; there are Dunkin Donut workers who feed our confirmation classes on Sunday mornings; and exhausted nurses getting off the all-night graveyard shift.

Mary Magdalene would fit right in on a Sunday morning 'L' – tired, numb, gazing out a window. It must have been a sleepless night for her. She tossed and turned. The image of the broken body of the one she loved had been seared upon her mind; and so she did what's often the only thing you can do when you can't sleep; she got up to walk, to walk off her anxiety. She was kept awake by grief, by a deep sense of loss, by anxiety about her future – all the things that we bring with us on our ride to Easter morning. Mary carried all of that as she walked on the streets of Jerusalem; ultimately, though, she carried within her the pain from the loss of love.

In the Gospel of John's version of Easter, we find Mary going to the tomb alone. In the other Gospels, other women go along with her, but in John she's all by herself. There is a loneliness in grief. There is a loneliness in people who are out walking the streets early on a Sunday morning when the rest of the world is asleep. When Mary comes to the tomb and finds that the stone is rolled away, she becomes dazed and confused. She runs to tell her friends Peter and John. All she can do is repeat the same thing over and over again, "They've taken away my lord and I don't know where they've put him; they've taken away my lord, and I don't know where they've put him."

The men run through the deserted streets to the tomb, and they find the tomb empty, just as Mary said. But then they just turn around and go home, leaving her all alone again at the tomb, weeping over the loss of her love. When she stoops down to look inside the tomb and sees that there are angels inside, she doesn't even react to their presence. She's numb. Grief can blind us to the angels that are standing right next to us. She says the same thing to them, "They've taken away my lord, and I don't know where they've put him." She turns away from the tomb and comes face to face with Jesus, but she doesn't even recognize the one she loves, because her eyes are clouded with tears. Mary's grief is the grief of someone who has loved deeply, because pain is part of the vulnerability of love.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks a lot about love to his followers. Love is the essence of who he is. If you worship at St. Pauls on Christmas Eve or on Good Friday, every year you hear the opening words of John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God; and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And the most familiar verse in the New Testament also comes from John: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. God is love, John also says. When the Word becomes flesh, when God becomes one of us, love is born and love lives in our midst. God takes the form of vulnerable human love and all of the pain and risk that love entails.

But our world has a difficult time with love, so much so that we killed the Lord of love. Why would we kill love? Isn't love a many splendored thing? Doesn't love make the world go round? The events of this past week in Iowa and Vermont have been encouraging for those who long to see all good and loving relationships supported and affirmed. But at the same time, we've also seen how love can be viewed as a dangerous threat, and can even incite violence.

A man comes up to Jesus and asks him. "What's the greatest commandment?" and we've heard the answer many times before: Love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That doesn't sound too threatening. But the man pushes the point and asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" And we then begin to find out that when Jesus talks about love, he's talking about something much more radical than our own familiar loves. He's talking about something for which you just might get yourself killed. Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The story says that my neighbor is not someone who thinks like me, acts like me, worships like me. My neighbor is the Samaritan – someone who his contemporaries considered a no-good, half-breed, unorthodox apostate.

That's risky love. Our world is divided along ethnic, religious, cultural and political lines. We learn that in order to be accepted by our group we're only allowed to love certain people. But God's love pushes us out of our comfort zones. Jesus puts his money where his mouth is by hanging out with disreputable, dangerous people, eating with them, being friends with them, and that sort of love gets him into trouble.

And Jesus pushed the love envelope even further. He tells us not merely to love people who are different from us, but to love our enemies. Love gets no more radical than that. Jesus' contemporaries knew exactly who their enemy was. They had real enemies – the occupying, brutal Romans. How could he tell his own people to love that kind of an enemy? Isn't that unpatriotic? Doesn't that put everything we stand for at risk, our whole way of life? Loving our enemies is vulnerable love to the extreme. And so we said: Jesus, you've gone too far now; you've crossed the line. We couldn't stand a love that deep, and so we had to put love to death. We felt that we had no choice.

At the last supper, Jesus tells his followers how deeply he loves them. He tells them he's like a good shepherd who knows them intimately and calls each one of them by name. He tells them to love one other, just like he loves them. He says: that's how people will know that we're his disciples, because we love one other. They will know we are Christians by our love. How do people know that you are a Christian? What distinguishes your love as a follower of Jesus? Do you love outrageously? Do you love extravagantly? Do you love enough that your love just might get you into trouble? Finally he tells them that no one has greater love than this, than to lay down your life for your friends. None of his followers ever thought it would come to that. Nobody ever thought that it would come to death.

Love seems to be such a weak thing, doesn't it? The Roman Empire. That's powerful. Religious bigotry. Strong stuff. Wealth and military might. Powerful. What's love compared to the violence caused by hatred and fear? All the powers that conspired against Jesus, that conspired against the Lord of love, put their full force against him and put love to death. Death, as always, had the last word. That's how the world works.

That's what Mary thought as she walked the streets of Jerusalem early on that Sunday morning. That's what all his disciples thought. There seemed to be so much promise in Jesus, so much hope in all of his talk about love. But just as it had always been – death and fear had the last word.

Standing at the tomb, weeping over the loss of her love, Mary doesn't recognize that Jesus, her love, is standing right in front of her. But with one word, just one word, her eyes were opened.

“Mary.” He speaks her name. “Mary.” There is nothing like the sound of your own name on the lips of someone who loves you. It only takes one word, “Mary,” and her life will never be the same again.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In him was life and the life was the light of all people.” On Good Friday, the darkness appears to have overcome the light of love and put it out. But on Easter morning, the Word speaks again, and the first words of Easter are words of love. “Mary.” Jesus speaks her name. Jesus speaks *your* name.

Easter isn't about Jesus dying and going to heaven. If that's all that happened, then this world stays pretty much the same as it did on Good Friday, where the powers of hatred and violence have the last word. But the Word that was in the beginning also has the last word. That's the hope of Easter. When God so loves the world, God doesn't give up on this world even when we've done our worst and put love to death.

Our world matters to God. Flesh and blood matter. The lives that you and I live matter. That's why I believe in the resurrection. The one who created our world, who loved us enough to become flesh, is committed to loving our world, no matter what. God does not abandon us to our violence, to our pain, to our grief. The resurrection is the grounding of our hope that the God who has created is still creating, creating a new world.

We live in an in-between time, a post-Easter time yet before God's love has finished its work in the world. The world still groans with pain and grief and violence that try to quench the power of self-giving love. And our world longs for resurrection. All of our anxiety, our aimlessness, our sin, long to be healed by love.

Paul speaks of our future hope, the future opened up by Easter. He said, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Love never ends.”

The writer Tom Wright has said that love is not our duty. Love is our destiny. Love is our future, because love never ends. Our future is not an oblivion; and the future is not something to be feared. We don't even need to fear death itself. Easter is the grounding of our hope that you and I can take the risk of love. The Lord of love is risen. Love has come again. And love will have the last word.