

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
April 12, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Jeremiah 31:2-6
John 20: 1-18

Sermon: Just Follow

How many of you remember watching TV a few decades ago, and tuning in to some show where you were invited to sing-along? If I say CBC's Hymn Sing, that REALLY dates me, but I can also remember watching children's shows like Walt Disney, or Sunday afternoons sitting with my grandmother and watching the Lawrence Welk show.

When they wanted you to sing along, the words would appear in a teletype across the bottom of the screen. But you couldn't just sing them all when they appeared, no you had to "follow the bouncing ball!" A little ball would appear over the words, and it would highlight the word you were supposed to be singing, just as the song leader or piano or music track got to that place in the piece.

For the younger generation, karaoke machines have the same kind of feature – they usually highlight the word you are supposed to be singing when the music track gets there.

Just "follow the bouncing ball!" the song leader would say – making it sound really easy. But it was never that easy, at least not to me. Because when you're singing a phrase, like "Jesus Christ is risen today, hallelujah" – and you get behind – it's really hard to leave out a word to catch up: "Jesus Christ is ... day, hallelujah".

Just follow the bouncing ball... When what you actually have to do is get in front of the ball, and wait for the ball to catch up with you. In which case, you aren't really following after all – you already have to know that piece of music well enough, so you can get the timing perfectly and land on the right word at the same time that the ball bounced over it.

In this time of pandemic, and physical distancing, in this time of church closures and not gathering for worship, I feel like I have always been way behind the bouncing ball. I have found myself always resisting the need to cancel events when the writing was on the wall. I have always been setting the date for resuming our life in community way too soon. Over and over again, I have anticipated the young people in my house going back to school or on to summer jobs or their usual social activities way before it is realistic, given the nature of the virus and our efforts to "flatten the curve".

Yes, I confess, even scoffing at people wearing gloves and medical masks when they were shopping, only to have experts now saying it's not a bad idea after all.

Just TRY to follow the bouncing ball... It's not as easy as it sounds.

But perhaps, no clearly, this is something that identifies me with those earliest followers, the ones Jesus called and taught and shaped and loved during his years of ministry. The Peters and the Marys and the Marthas and the Andrews, and maybe especially doubting Thomas. No matter how clearly Jesus tried to spell out the drama of his witness and the importance of staying in time with God's promise - they just didn't get it. They had a really hard time keeping up to God's unfolding resurrection drama. They had a really hard time catching up to God's new rhythm of love and justice, equity and acceptance, hope in the midst of grief.

The gospel of John tells the story of Easter morning in such a beautiful way: Yes, it begins with a story of grief, of hearts broken, of hope devastated. *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb ...*

It was still dark for Mary and for all who had followed Jesus. If the sun had not risen, respectable people were not meant to be out and about. For Mary, this visit to Jesus' tomb was meant to be hidden, her grief something to be ashamed of. She had been collaborating with an enemy of both the state and the temple. She didn't want anyone to see her lay her tribute at the final resting place of a political prisoner, a failed Messiah, an object of scorn.

And yet Mary grieved deeply. She needed to mark the passing of someone she loved, a teacher she had followed, a rabbi she gave her own faith to. She needed to mark her broken dreams, her devastation. In the other three gospels it talks about a group of women coming that first Easter morning, bringing balms and spices to properly prepare the body. But in John's story Mary comes alone, empty-handed, without any purpose, except perhaps to grieve in a place where no one will see and judge her.

She finds the stone rolled away, the tomb empty. Oh my God! O my God! On top of the grief, the broken heart, now there is shock, fear, anger, denial. Why would anyone take his body from the grave? Why would anyone add this final indignity to his suffering and to their horror?

Even if dawn had broken and the day was no longer dark, Mary's skies were now deeply dark and shadowed. Her spirits were crushed by the insult heaped upon her mourning, and the disruption of an already slow and painful journey through grief.

She ran from the place to tell the others.

They followed and witnessed the same devastation, Peter and John. John could not bear the sight of the empty tomb, but Peter entered and the emptiness of the grave, the abandoned cloths echoed the desolation of his last hope. He never even had a chance to say good-bye.

They left Mary there alone, weeping, her worst fears confirmed. She heard the footsteps behind her, the man's voice asking 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.'

Jesus said to her: Mary! He might have said to her: Mary, you were the one who understood so much when no one knew what I was saying... Mary, listen to what I am saying now, catch up to where I am now, follow ME – stay in tune with me – we will sing this song of resurrection together.

And when she caught up with him – when she finally got it – when the light gradually dawned on her darkness, she called him “*Teacher/ Rabbouni*”. Not savior, not Messiah, not God or even Son of God. But Teacher – the one whom she had followed to the cross and now beyond.

Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because then you will fall behind again, and lose the tempo of this resurrection song that I am singing with you. Do not wallow in this beautiful moment, but take your wonder and your passion and your amazement and share it with the others. Do not fall behind what God and I am doing.

So Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary went and told the others. It took them even longer to catch up, to sing in time with that bouncing ball – it took yet another encounter with the risen Christ, real hands touching real wounds, the outpouring of the Spirit before they were bold enough to proclaim the good news.

One of my colleagues this week spoke about the dawning realization that flattening the curve will not take two weeks, or even a month – we may be worshipping in physical isolation, out of the sanctuary for several months. At the beginning I thought it would be a tragedy if we couldn't have our Palm Sunday parade in the sanctuary. But Easter on YouTube and Facetime only?? That was unthinkable.

But Easter is here, and I am not devastated. We had to endure a few weeks in our pandemic wilderness, in order to rediscover that it is not the sanctuary, or the special music, or the spring flowers that create the Easter hope. It always begins in darkness – in the grief and mourning of Jesus friends. Then there is that slow dawning awareness that while nothing has changed overnight – everything has changed overnight – if we let Easter change US. For God is always ahead of us, making an Easter miracle, even before our minds can comprehend it.

If we stay lost in the wilderness, even after we are allowed to gather in a sanctuary, with all our beloved friends, then we have missed the real miracle of Easter. When the world goes back to “normal”, we must rise again in such a way that even Mary does not recognize us at first.

God is doing amazing things in our midst – miracles of new life right before our eyes – holding even those who have died in infinite love – and forging connection where once

there was only brokenness and isolation. We just have to follow, however, keep the tempo, stay in tune and live with deeper faith. Christ is Risen Hallelujah Christ is risen indeed!