



“Easter Drag”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California

Easter Sunday
April 12, 2009
John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today’s scripture reading is John’s rendering of the Easter story. Each of the four gospels includes an Easter story. John’s is distinctive because of the author’s emphasis on the garden setting and the experience of Mary Magdalene.

According to John, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early on Sunday morning, and found the stone rolled away from Jesus’ grave. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciples and reported what she thought was a grave robbery. Peter and the others, in turn, ran back to the cemetery to investigate her report.

When they arrived at the cemetery, Peter entered the tomb, looked around, and saw everything and yet nothing, and he left confounded. Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener.

John, meanwhile, entered the tomb, saw that it was empty and believed. John saw, in the void, that Christ had risen, and he believed.

We, like Jesus’ first followers, gather this Easter morning in response to Mary Magdalene’s news that the stone has been rolled away, and that the tomb is empty, and so we sing with the faithful in every generation: “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”

MUSICAL MEDITATION

“Alleluia”¹

The Strife is O’er

Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia!

¹ Text: Transl. from Latin by Francis Pott. Tune: Giovanni Perluigi da Palestrina. Arr. By William H. Monk. Public domain.

SCRIPTURE READING

John 20:1-18

Susan Whiting

Early 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. So 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."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and 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. They 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."

When Mary had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Supposing Jesus 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!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to God. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Creator and to yours.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that Jesus had said these things to her.

SERMON

"Easter Drag"

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

What is Easter about for you?

I suspect that if we are honest with ourselves, the thought of Easter dredges up the ghost of Easter's past.

To be honest, Easter celebrations for me as a child were largely about Easter clothes, Easter baskets, and Easter vacations.

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I remember long car trips on cold rainy days to visit my grandparents. I remember festive Easter baskets filled with green plastic grass, and an assortment of malted eggs, jelly beans, marshmallow Peeps, and a hollowed-out chocolate bunny.

I also remember pink-polka-dotted-Swiss dresses with white lace collars, white tights, gloves, and patent-leather Mary Janes with matching purses. The Easter drag was my least favorite part of the holiday weekend.

Oh, if my friends could see me now . . .

I haven't been in a dress since the last millennium, and I swore off polka-dotted-Swiss in about 1968.

It may surprise you to hear that my mother once cautioned me that the ministry might not be a good fit for me on account of the fact that I didn't like to wear "church clothes."

I pondered that observation for a moment, and then replied, "The church will have to change."

Fortunately, it has, and so have I.

The thought occurs to me that every Easter celebration has been at least partly about Easter dress. In John 20:15, for example, the author explains that Mary Magdalene took one look at Jesus and presumed him to be the gardener. Perhaps it was his Easter drag that foiled this first follower who arrived early to the tomb.

One wonders how often we, like Mary Magdalene, miss seeing the resurrected Christ on account of the fact that he is not wearing the "Easter uniform" that we expect, or because she is cast in a different role than we have been taught to look for.

The term "drag" in its broadest sense has to do with any type of clothing one wears. Traditionally, drag is a term used for any costume or outfit that a person wears that carries a symbolic significance.

According to wikipedia.com, the term drag can be traced to the 1870s in England where the concept seems to have originated in the theatre, where costumes and characters were the norm.

In modern times, of course, drag has become associated with cross-dressing and gender-bending. But, truth be told, all of us do drag in that we all wear costumes that could be considered drag in some historical period or cultural setting, and our costumes and roles have evolved and changed over time.

Think how much clothing, shoes, eye glasses, and hair styles have changed over the years. Stuff I looked bad in, in the 1960s, is coming back around, and I am sorry to report, it doesn't look any better on me these days, than it did forty years ago.

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It often shocks teenagers when I tell them that pants are a modern idea—a convention of the 15th century that was popularized when horse riding became a common part of warfare. Before that time, men and women both wore long flowing robes that were more similar than different.

Most of us know that it was normative for women to wear dresses until the 1940s, when wearing pants became more acceptable—first as a cost-saving measure and an accommodation to more physical and sometimes dangerous machine work in the factories and on the farms—work that women embraced in droves during the War.

Today, thankfully, pants are common dress for everyone, and pants are an accepted part of formal Sunday and attire for all of us. The kaleidoscope of convention continues to evolve, and so does the kaleidoscope of ways that we may imagine God.

Consider if you will the Easter drag that God puts on.

The great Swedish-American poet, Carl Sandburg, once described God as a working man in his poem titled “God is No Gentleman” that he published in a poetry collection called *Honey and Salt*.² Here, Sandburg writes:

God gets up in the morning and says, "Another day?"
God goes to work every day at regular hours.
God is no gentleman, for God puts on overalls
and gets dirty running the universe we know about
and several other universes nobody knows about but Him.

Carol Fontaine, a Hebrew Bible scholar and one of my seminary professors at Andover Newton, imagined God in entirely different drag from Carl Sandburg. Dr. Fontaine introduced me and more than a generation of seminary students to the multifaceted nature and drag of the God depicted in what Christians refer to as the “Old Testament.”

Here, she explained, one of the names for God in Hebrew is “Shekinah,” and one of the translations of Shekinah from Hebrew to English is: “the one who pitches her tent with us.”

Dr. Fontaine went on to explain to us that in her view the Christian concept of Holy Spirit is borrowed from the Hebrew concept of Shekinah. To get illustrate her point, one day she sketched a cartoon of the Shekinah, brought it to Old Testament class, and read aloud her caption, which said simply: “The Shekinah dresses up as Casper the Ghost in order to sneak into the Trinity.”

I wonder what Easter drag God is wearing today. Can you imagine?

² Carl Sandburg, “God is No Gentleman,” in *Honey and Salt* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1963), p. 39.

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Maybe the resurrected Christ is decked out in an Easter bonnet, or a pinstriped suit. Maybe the resurrected Christ is dressed for work with gardening gloves and overalls. Or maybe the resurrected Christ is wearing a choir robe or a bunny costume.

Maybe the resurrected Christ is wearing polka-dotted-Swiss and sporting a new tattoo. Maybe the resurrected Christ has a hair color not found in nature and shops at thrift stores. Or maybe the resurrected Christ has more piercings than you can count and a few you hope never to see.

However you and I imagine the resurrected Christ, we can be sure that God is ready to surprise us with yet another new “do,” and that She/He is present in our lives—especially in our most grief-stricken places—encouraging us, like John, to keep our faith eyes wide open to the Easter blessings around us.

Friends, look and see: God’s fullness lives in the empty tomb, even death itself has died. Go and tell others what you have seen and heard: the Easter Jesus is alive and living among us. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.