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John 20:1-18

Our Wildest Imaginations

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There are times when a box is more than a box.

***Child in a Box Slide**

There are times when a blanket is more than a blanket.

***Blanket Fort Picture Slide**

There are times when a towel isn't just a towel.

***Towel as Cape Slide**

Children have a way of seeing something extraordinary in what is ordinary.

When my son, Christopher, was 4 years old, we were in the car waiting in line to drop him off at preschool. In the car ahead of us, was his friend, Luke. Luke's mom got out of the passenger front seat to help him out of his car seat and, when she did, Luke dropped the cup he was holding, and it rolled under the car. The driver's door opened, and Luke's dad got out to help. This is what I saw when I looked at Luke's dad.

***Guy in a Trench Coat Slide**

Christopher, watching the whole thing, exclaimed, "Oh my gosh! Luke's dad is Inspector Gadget." This is what Christopher saw.

***Inspector Gadget Slide**

A child can be a pirate today and a superhero tomorrow. Inspector Gadget could live down the street. Children begin life believing anything is possible. Their imaginations tell them so!

When I was 5 years old, the movie "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, starring Gene Wilder, was released. It was my favorite movie for a very long time, maybe it still is. One of the best scenes in the movie is when the children enter the Chocolate Room. A big dark-colored, ancient looking, creaky door opens, and they step inside. At first the camera is on the children and the adults who

accompany them, but then, the camera pans over and we, the viewers, can see what they see.

***Chocolate Room Slide**

A room filled with candy, a chocolate waterfall, and a chocolate river. Everything in the room...the flowers, the things hanging from trees, all of it is candy. The children immediately get to work tasting everything in the room while Gene Wilder sings:

**Alex: Come with me and you'll be
In a world of pure imagination
Take a look and you'll see
Into your imagination**

**We'll begin with a spin
Traveling in the world of my creation
What we'll see will defy
Explanation**

**If you want to view paradise
Simply look around and view it
Anything you want to, do it
Want to change the world?
There's nothing to it**

“A world of pure imagination...” As a child, if someone had asked me to imagine a world I would create, that world, I confess, would have been a lot like the Chocolate Room in Willy Wonka. It would have been colorful and tasty. There also would have been unicorns.

And the trees would have looked like this.

***Lorax Trees Slide**

With age, I let go of that specific vision for the perfect world, though I still, every once in while, find myself muttering, “If I was in charge of the world, there would be a lot more fun.” But generally, the truth is, I don’t spend much time imagining much of anything these days. I wonder if that is true for you too. For me, real life just takes up too much time and too much head space.

So, just for today...can we let our imaginations run away with us?

Take your imaginations out, dust them off, and get ready to use them. Because you see, the Easter story demands it. The story of the empty tomb demands that we imagine a world in which death does not win and hope is everywhere.

This is John 20:1-18:

20 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. ² 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.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸ 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.

Jesus spent three years with his followers, trying to help them imagine that the world and their lives could be very different from what they were. Jesus did not

spend his time imagining chocolate rooms, unicorns, or Lorax trees, but a world in which the ones who had been left on the outside were finally welcomed in; a world in which there was enough to share with their neighbors and where the ones who were supposed to care *for* the people actually cared *about* the people. As long as Jesus was there beside them, showing them, teaching them, revealing the ways of God to them, the world they imagined was not a fantasy, it was a real possibility.

But as this story opens, Jesus is no longer with them. The author of John's resurrection story features Mary Magdalene, Peter, and "the disciple who Jesus loved." If you were in worship a few weeks ago when the "disciple who Jesus loved" showed up at the dinner table with Jesus, you know that scholars who have studied this Gospel believe the unnamed Beloved Disciple was not one specific person, but a symbol for anyone who hears and reads this story; it is every disciple, it is you and it is me. The story as it appears in the Gospel is really two stories. One story is about Mary Magdalene's experience at the tomb and the other is about Peter's experience, along with the symbolic Beloved Disciple. Today, let's focus on Mary's experience.

Because of what that had happened surrounding Jesus's death, all the early followers of Jesus were traumatized. Their friend had been killed in the most brutal way available. Mary, unlike the other disciples who were close to Jesus, that had betrayed, denied, and scattered, remained at the cross as he died, along with Jesus's mother and aunt; the three women bearing witness to his suffering. It was gut wrenching. There are some things a person cannot ever unsee. This seems like it would be one of those things.

On this day, Mary went to the tomb, which held not only her friend's body, but the vision of how she had imagined the world could be, a vision planted in her heart by Jesus. In so many ways, the tomb was like a barrier against everything Jesus stood for and everything Mary had imagined. How could he have been so wrong? He was dead and so was her hope as she walked to the tomb that day.

When she arrived there, it was still dark. I wonder if you can think of anyone else in the Gospel of John who encountered Jesus in the dark: Nicodemus, who we have cleverly referred to as "Nic @ Night." And you will remember from his story that in this Gospel, darkness symbolizes unbelief and not understanding. Mary,

though she was very close to Jesus, could not make sense of what had happened to her friend. There in the predawn darkness, she could see that things were not as they should have been. The stone that had sealed the entrance to the tomb had been moved. Because we know where the story is going, we see a glimmer of hope in the rolled away stone. Mary, grief-stricken, traumatized, and confused, can only assume that just when she thought things couldn't get worse, they had. Someone had violated the sanctity of the tomb, maybe the grave had even been robbed. This is what the story says she reported to Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

She stood outside the tomb crying and finally had the courage to look inside. Steeling herself for whatever she would see, she bent over and looked. She saw two angels. They asked her why she was crying, and she told them of her loss and, her worst fears confirmed, that her friend's body was missing. He was, she still believed, bound by that body which meant the only way she could be near him was to be near his body and it was gone.

Just then, she turned around and there was Jesus, only Mary didn't recognize him. This seems weird to us, doesn't it? How can she not recognize Jesus? I don't know what the author wanted us to think when he wrote that and, truthfully, scholars don't either. Maybe Mary unable to recognize Jesus was the author's way of conveying that Mary was still "in the dark," she still didn't understand. Maybe the author wanted us to imagine Mary, having been traumatized once when Jesus died and again with his missing body, eyes clouded because she had been crying for so long, just simply could not wrap her mind around what was happening. Either way, the tomb was in a garden, so guessing that Jesus was the gardener wasn't an assumption completely divorced from reality.

Just as the angels had asked Mary why she was crying, Jesus asked the same thing. Now, I am sorry, but that just seems like a ridiculous question for Jesus to ask. Would it not be obvious to even the casual observer why his friend, who had stood at the foot of the cross and who was standing at the entrance to his empty tomb, would be crying? I mean...c'mon Jesus. Mary, bless her heart, ignored his question, and told him that if he knew where Jesus's body was to tell her. All she wanted right then was to be near what was left of him and to grieve the future story she had imagined. Just when Mary probably felt like she wanted to drown in

a puddle of her own tears, Jesus said to her, “Mary!” He called her by name, and she recognized the sound of his voice.

She responded to her name by using a title of great affection, “Rabbouni,” which means teacher. That she recognizes Jesus as teacher is simultaneously an acknowledgement about who Jesus is and a confirmation of who she is. We are reminded here that in the world Jesus imagines, the world he had helped Mary and the others to see, everyone can be a disciple: women, Samaritans, people who were sick...everyone. Mary must have been a hugger...who wouldn't be in that situation? She tried to get closer to him, but he warned her not to. The text says that Jesus said, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father...I am ascending.” According to author and Episcopalian Bishop, John Shelby Spong, what Jesus means is that he was being transformed. He was being freed from all human limits to enter into that which is universal and unending.”¹

Jesus was no longer bound by his body. The grave cloths that were wrapped around him were still in the tomb, but Jesus was outside in the garden; he was free. Mary finally understands. The scene ends with Mary going to the disciples to confess, “I have seen the Lord,” and, I would point out, she had also once again seen a glimpse of that world she had imagined. When Jesus called her by name, Mary knew that death had not separated her from him or from who she was called to be. She was known and she was loved. She was called to be a follower of Jesus, to pick up where he left off. For Mary, the grave had turned to a garden and the world she had imagined was possible again.

The community of believers for whom the Gospel of John was written saw in this story that the world they imagined was possible too. They were Jesus's disciples too. There was a place for them on the inside of God's love. Through the stories of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, the author of John convinced them that the life Jesus lived was the life of God. The love he shared was the love of God. His very being revealed the being of God. Through him, they knew who they were and who God was, and they could step into the life they imagined and claim it for their own. And we can do the same thing. But first...we must imagine it.

¹ Spong, John Shelby, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One: New York: 2013, 282.

What does this story that begins in darkness and grief and ends with the dawn of a new day that brings hope and room for new dreams inspire you to imagine? Let your imagination run wild...what do you see?

When singer and songwriter Dolly Parton did that in 1995, she imagined that every child in her county in Tennessee would learn to read, so she created Imagination Library. That dream proved to be too small though. Now every child in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Ireland can receive a new book every month from birth to age 5. All families have to do is register. Dolly imagines a world where every child learns to read.

Actors and entrepreneurs, Kristen Bell and Dax Shepard are parents who imagined a world in which everyone behaves as if there is no such thing as other people's children. They have made a huge commitment to caring for the environment we will pass along to our babies.

***Hello Bello Box**

Their baby product company, Hello Bello, not only offers biodegradable diapers, but the boxes the diapers are shipped in are designed to be upcycled and to spark the imaginations of the little ones using their products.

You can see in the picture this box was upcycled to a puppet stage.

And speaking of upcycling...I hope you noticed the art hanging from the rafters.

It was created by the imagination of Josh Waddell, owner of 3 Bulls UPcycling. I encourage you to take a picture of it after worship and then zoom in on its parts. He has used items that would have been thrown away to bring beauty to this space and to remind us that even things can be made new. Josh's artwork asks us to imagine a world that is not disposable, where our trash cans are not filled to overflowing every week, where one of the pressing problems of large municipalities is no longer what to do with all the garbage?

The Easter story asks us to imagine a world made new and to believe that what we imagine is really possible. What do you imagine?

At the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned that my sense is that many of us grown-ups don't have the time or mental space to really let our imaginations run wild. Maybe we have just convinced ourselves that imagining is for children. I know in my heart that isn't true. I learned in seminary that one of the jobs of

ministers is to help people imagine that the world really can be as God envisions it. One of the books assigned was *Prophetic Imagination* by theologian Walter Brueggemann. In it, he wrote, "The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing."

The story of the resurrection begs us to imagine and believe that the things that are robbing all of us and our neighbors of abundant life, of unceasing joy, and lasting peace, will be overcome. Can you imagine it?

When I let my imagination go, I imagine a world where everyone is included. And when I first started imagining it, it seemed like pure fantasy. But, because of you, that vision has come so clearly into focus for me in the last few years that I finally am allowing myself to not only dream it, but to believe it too. I know that one day the very idea that someone would be excluded from community because of who they love, how they identify or express their gender, the color of their skin, their religious tradition or lack of a religious tradition, their country of origin, how much education or money they have...the very idea that there would not be a place for everyone, that voices and experiences would be silenced and ignored, would be so ridiculous and unthinkable that it would just not be tolerated. I get a glimpse of it right here, every single day.

It is the stories of Jesus, a wide-eyed dreamer himself, that encouraged me to imagine something different, to refuse to accept the way things are. The resurrection story is an invitation for us to imagine that anything is possible and to remember that this story it is not the end of the story.

In the words of poet, Amanda Gorman,
*"When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Be brave with your life. Let your imagination soar! Dream of graves turned to gardens and a world in which all of creation testifies to a God who invites each

one of us into relationship and declares, "You are my child, you belong to me. You are loved...more than you know." Happy Easter!

Amen.