

“The First Day”

An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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Who remembers their first day of school? Was it a happy day? A scary day? Or maybe a bit of both?

First days can be hard. Beginnings can be difficult. At the beginning, there is so much we do not know. The uncertainty can feel threatening with its potential for problems and challenges that we have not yet encountered.

And yet, first days can also be exciting. They are full of possibility—not only for how things may go wrong, but also for the joy of how they may go right by giving us new experiences, friendships, and learnings. Beginnings can open whole new paths to explore.

Have you ever considered that Easter is a first day? In the traditional Christian story, Easter occurs on the first day of the week. And it is also the first day of Jesus’ resurrection or return to life. John 20 of the Christian Bible, reads:

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.” (NRSV)

Like so many first days, this first day was full of uncertainty and mystery. Just two days earlier Jesus had been killed by the authorities for being a religious and political “troublemaker.” On that same day Jesus was laid in a tomb, which was really a cave with a large, heavy rock rolled in front of it. As the following day was the Jewish Sabbath, none of Jesus’ friends visited the tomb. Finally, on the third day since Jesus’ death, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

But no Jesus. Why?

In the traditional Christian story, Jesus is understood to be risen from the dead in a bodily sense. However, what I read in this moment, on this first day, is a mystery. Where is Jesus? What has happened? Did someone take his body—as Mary Magdalene first assumed?

How these questions get answered has shaped people's understanding of Christianity for 2000 years. And there are many different ideas! Rather than rehash all the possible answers, I want to dwell in that moment of the first day when there were no answers, just mystery and possibility.

"I dwell in possibility," the poet Emily Dickinson wrote. What *is* possible on a first day? What is possible on the first day that you meet someone who catches your eye? The first day you meet and begin a conversation that might last a moment or a lifetime. Or what is possible on the first day of a new job, a new school, a new religious community?

We face so many "first days" in our lives. With infants and small children, we pay closer attention to the firsts—the first time a baby sits, crawls, stands, walks. We snap photos of the first time a child has a birthday, goes to school, rides a bike, learns to swim. First days so often have a holiness about them, a sense of being set apart and special.

When do we stop paying attention to "first days"? There are still many first days as adults. The first day of a new job, a new hobby, a new exercise regimen. The first day of a new house, a new pet, a new decade of life (or even a new century like our own Mary who turned 100 last Thursday!).

Of course, some first days mark new beginnings that are hard, even painful. The first day with all the kids moved out. The first day of an empty schedule post-retirement. The first day after a troubling diagnosis. The first day after the death of a beloved.

For Mary Magdalene, she had already faced the first day without her beloved teacher on Saturday. Then, the next day, while it was still dark, she made her way to the tomb. Unexpectedly, she found it empty. Suddenly she was confronted with a distressing mystery. Racing to share her confusion with Peter and another disciple, they too found only questions. After seeing the empty tomb, they too were confused. The Biblical text adds this line of explanation: "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead." Such an addition underscores the mystery and confusion in the moment of that first day.

First days are often shrouded in mystery and confusion. Whether we venture into the first day with anticipation or dread, the firstness marks a moment of crossing over from an old knowing to a new knowing; an old way of being into a new way of being. And in this moment of crossing over there is a kind of transformation of experience, perhaps even of our ourselves.

What firsts have changed you? I remember the first day I walked back into a seminary classroom after my divorce and knew immediately I wanted to finish my degree. I remember the first day I stood here as your candidate for ministry, freshly ordained and trying hard to learn names, to learn about you. And I remember the first day I stood here in an empty sanctuary preaching to an iPhone at the start of the pandemic. So also, I will remember last Sunday, the first day we had more people in the sanctuary than online.

Noticing first days matters because they signal places where the story of your life unfolds—whether you are one month, one year, fifty-one or one hundred years old. We are never too old to experience or to notice first days. First days signal that like the new life of spring, life is still evolving, changing, and transforming us. To notice them is to notice Life flowing in and through us.

Noticing that Life continues is the Easter message. One need not believe in bodily resurrection to have faith in the power of Life to continue even after the experience of death. The story of Jesus' life and teachings continues no matter what in fact happened to his body that day.

Life also continues in and through each and all of us here and online. In celebrating Easter, we take time to notice this miracle of the continuing flow of Life. It is no accident that Easter falls in spring just as the landscape around us demonstrates this renewal of life in new bud, leaf, and flower.

So let us celebrate Life! Let us notice our first days and the presence of continuing Life in each ongoing flutter of movement and experience.

So may it be.
Amen.