

Donovan Drake
"They"
John 20: 1-18
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Easter 2005

John 20: 1-18

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.

Easter Sunday begins with an accusation. "They have taken the Lord...!" Who are they? We know who "they" are. We all have a "they." They're the ones who are to blame. They're the ones who are against us. They're the ones who get in our way. You want to know who's ruining this country? They are! They're the reason for the price of a gallon of gas. They're the reason why I can't catch a break. They're the reason this whole thing started in the first place. "What happened?" "Let me tell you! They..." Last week I heard that Mississippi State had a home court advantage in Charlotte. Home court advantage in North Carolina? Because "They" were rooting against Duke. Who's they? They're the one's in light blue. No. No. No. They're the ones in dark blue. They're the ones in green and white.

Who are they? It depends on who you ask! Depends on what side you're on. Are you on my side or are you on their side?

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that "they" is for the birds - literally.

I don't know how it is at your house around this time of year, but at my house, I have birds. I have birds that sing at 5:11 a.m. in the morning. Singing away outside my window. Chirping. Telling jokes. "Did you hear the one about the preacher who's trying to sleep?" Birds laughing outside my window.

The sun isn't even up. I wrap a pillow around my ears and pray that God will take his eye off the sparrow, off the robin, off the cardinal, off whatever that bird is outside my window. I used to love birds, and now I want them eliminated. When you start your day wanting to kill a song bird, that's a bad sign. (For the record, I'm not for killing song birds.) But they are driving me crazy! I'm saying, "It doesn't take much to be a 'they'!"

"They" can have feathers. "They" can be Gators. "They" can be Tigers or Wildcats or Tar heels. Oh please, don't tell me you're one of "them"! "They" can be parents. "They want me back home by 11:00 p.m." "They" can be those crazy Tea Party conservatives. "They" can be those anything-goes liberals. "They" can be those people who are always asking for money. "Why can't they just get a job?" "They're the ones who are taking our jobs."

They say that the young Native American boy, before he went to school in Minnesota with a gun and killed, and killed, and killed, until he killed himself...they say he posted his thoughts on a Neo Nazi website. They say that's not unusual for those who feel left out, disenfranchised, forgotten. They say, "We've seen it before."

Do you know what they say about that woman, Terry Shivo? They say that before she had a heart attack she struggled with bulimia. Bulimia is that psychological eating disorder that reeks havoc on the body. She wanted to be thin so she would purge herself of food. Why would anyone do that? Because we're not beautiful, if we're not thin. Because we're not attractive, if we're not skinny. Because you'll never catch anyone's eye if you don't ship up. Who says that? They, say bulimia caused her heart attack. They say it's ironic that someone who had an aversion to food is on a feeding tube. And now we've heard them say that the feeding tube needs to be removed. "She's not alive." But we also heard them say, "The feeding tube needs to stay, because life is sacred." The decision to live or die isn't up to Terry. Who decides? They.

They're always up to something; and on Easter, of all days, Mary is pointing a finger. Mary, weeping in a garden, tells a couple of angels, "They have taken my Lord away. And I don't know where they've laid him."

Who are "they"? Why not just name them? Are "they" the Romans? Are "they" the religious authorities? Are "they" grave robbers? Who could possibly take the Lord away?

Well, if you ask an old preacher, he will tell you Ed Sullivan took the Lord away. It used to be that most churches would have two services - Sunday morning and Sunday evening. We don't do that anymore, because when Ed Sullivan came on the TV on Sunday evening, the preacher climbed into the pulpit and realized he was preaching to an empty room. The old preacher will tell you that Ed Sullivan took the Lord away.

If you ask a young preacher who took the Lord away, she'll say youth athletics! It used to be Sunday was a day for church. Not anymore! There's traveling soccer teams and traveling baseball teams. "You can't hold Confirmation class at that time?" "Why not?" "There's a game!" "Okay, we'll have it at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday evening." "You can't have it then." "Why not?" "There's practice!" "Okay! 10:00 p.m. Sunday night" "Too late!" "Who says?" "Concerned parents, worried about too much church." Who took the Lord away? Ask the young preacher. She'll tell you.

Who are they? Depends on who you ask!

You ask a conservative, and they'll say it's the courts. "They're taking the Lord out of the schools, out of the Pledge, out of the country." You ask a liberal, and they'll say it's those right-wingers who have Jesus so wrapped up in the flag that I can't find him anymore.

Some say it's the news media, 24/7 news that will make you believe in a culture of fear. News that will make you believe in "they"! They'll make you so worried about your life - if you can call it a life.

"Do you know?" she asked the gardener. "Do you know where they took him, where they carried him?...If you know...I...I...I will take him away!" I will take him away, away from them!

But then the gardener said a name. The gardener said, "Mary!"

And suddenly the dead are alive. Suddenly the gardener is the Lord. Suddenly they don't have him, and they don't matter! She's got her Lord back! She rushes to hold on to him, but no! "Do not hold on to me!"

And there is a message for Easter! There is a message that comes right from the Lord. No one can hold onto him! You see, he's on the loose.

They can't get him! Not the liberals, not the conservatives, not the evangelicals, not the demons. They can't get him! Not the Romans, the authorities; not the low court or the high court; not the believers or the unbelievers. "Not angels or demons, not things present nor things to come, not height nor depth, not anything in all creation..." Not even death! "Oh death, where is your sting?"

And that's why we come. That's why so many of us come. Look at this room, filled with the fragrance of lilies, the sound of music, the amazing celebration. Wow! I've been to lots of worship services, but, Lord, this is quite a day. This day just screams, "We have the Lord!"

Wrong! The surprise of Easter and the Good News of Easter is not that we have Jesus. No; we are not allowed to hold on to him. The surprise of Easter is that the Lord has us. The Lord has torn down the dividing walls of us and them, we and they, my side and yours, the have's and have not's. We are at our finest when we discover it!

I spoke with a friend of mine who told me of his daughter filling a shoe box of supplies for people over a half a world away. Victims of a wave. I don't know if you have heard of that ministry, where children pack boxes for victims of a disaster. . A shoe box filled with soap, washcloth, toothbrush and paste. He noticed in the shoe box that his daughter had placed a polished rock. "You're sending a rock?" His six-year-old said, "It's my most favorite rock. Isn't it pretty? I wanted to send something pretty that they'll like." "How do you know that they'll like your rock?" "Come on, Daddy! Silly!" she said, "They're just like me!"

Ask a six year old. No more "They." The one who shoots the winning point. The one who covers his head with his basketball jersey. The one who climbs into Air Force One. The American Indian on the reservation. The husband of Terry Shivo. The daddy. The

momma. The child. They're just like you and me. We forget that, but God doesn't. These are the people that inspired God to love.

The Rev. Dr. Donovan Drake