

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, March 27, 2016
Text: John 20:1-18



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Years ago my wife, Sally, and I walked to the top of the Glastonbury Tor and met a man who danced for us. I took a photograph of him that I have had sitting on a bookshelf in my office ever since. It is an unsettling picture, in a way. The man has his arms outspread with his hands wide open, and it always looks to me at first glance like a crucifixion scene, a man with arms stretched wide against an empty sky. But when we look closely we see that he is smiling, he is delighted, and his feet are dancing.

Glastonbury is a strange little town in the southwest of England, south of Bath and Wells, west of Salisbury. It is a pilgrimage site for mystics and people who gaze at crystals, for contemplative musicians, and 1960's hippies who want to stay that way. This man was one of those, someone who loved just to sit and strum his guitar for sheer delight, letting go of the world so that it may go by at its own pace.

As I said, Sally and I met him at the top of the Tor. The Tor is a 518-foot high hill on the edge of Glastonbury, an anomaly of clay and sandstone in an otherwise low-lying, damp landscape of fens. At the summit are the ruins of the 14th Century Church of St. Michael. Taking a 360-degree look from up there, it is as if you are on top of the world. You can look out onto the countryside of the King Arthur legends, to the land formations in which some people have seen the signs of the zodiac represented, and across to the low hill where, tradition has it, Joseph of Arimathea came to England from Jerusalem, stuck his walking stick into the ground, and a tree of thorns bloomed forth. You still can see remnants of that tree today. And, the legend continues; Joseph buried the Holy Grail, some think it was the chalice from the Last Supper, in the ground of the Tor, yet to be found. This would have been Joseph of Arimathea's second trip to England. On his first he brought the boy Jesus with him to buy what he needed for his tin business back home.

"And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:

And was the Holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?" (William Blake, "Jerusalem.")

The man was sitting on the ground and playing his guitar inside the ruined tower of the church when we got there. He was not busking, asking for money; he simply was enjoying himself. We stopped and listened. He said to us, "Do you see that pedestal over there?" and he pointed to a rock cylinder with a flat metal top. "It is hollow. Let me show you." He put down his guitar, stood up, walked over to the platform, jumped onto it, and began to dance, stomping out a frenetic rhythm that could be heard all the way to the foot of the hill where the Chalice Well flows red water in honor of the Virgin Mary.

The metal disk on top of the pedestal . . . once he got off I looked and saw that etched on it was a panoramic map of all of the land formations we could see in every direction. In that moment, in that place, he had been dancing on top of the world. No wonder that he was smiling.

Now, I am not insisting that he is what the risen Christ looks like, a bit scruffy in his combat boots, wearing a hoodie. We carry with us a more idealized vision, someone like the actor Jeffrey Hunter in the 1961 movie, "King of Kings" . . . six feet tall, wavy black hair, perfect complexion, unfailingly handsome, from Whitefish Bay, looking like a Midwestern Presbyterian. But in that moment, at the top of the Tor, dancing on his pedestal, unnervingly representing the crucifixion and the resurrection in the very same moment, there was this man dancing on top of the world.

"Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the lord of the Dance, said he.

And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he,"

Sydney Carter's poem from 1963 that he set to a 19th Century Shaker tune, now a favorite for many congregations. Here is the image of Jesus as the dancer supreme, from the first to the last, always dancing.

Dancing is a common image in the Bible. David danced before the Lord with all his might, we read in Second Samuel (Ch. 6), much to the loathing of his wife. "What were you doing out there, O Great King David, prancing around in your loin cloth in front of everybody?!" More congenial is the call to all of God's people to praise God:

"Praise the Lord! Praise God in the sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament.

Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!" (Ps.150)

This is from the closing psalm of the ancient hymnal of the synagogue.

We are told that early theologians, apparently with nothing else to do, would argue over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Years ago Chicago was preparing for a visit by Pope John Paul II. The mayor and others at City Hall were deciding where to hold the outdoor Mass. The suggestion was made that it be held at the north end of Grant Park where the Petrillo Band Shell is located, but someone cautioned, "Remember that there is a huge parking garage underground at that site." So, engineers began to calculate what size crowd could the ground support before it all caved in. That discussion caused one of my favorite folk singers, Art Thieme, to lament, "We see just how far theology has fallen. We used to argue about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin; now we argue over how many Catholics can stand on the roof of a garage."

Dancing, it is there in the Bible, and Sydney Carter sees it in Jesus Christ, from the beginning to the end. "I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun." Trinitarian theology as early as John the Gospel writer has Jesus present at creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," Jesus being "the Word made flesh." (John 1:1,14) "He was in the beginning with God." (:2)

"I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth. At Bethlehem I had my birth." Jesus dances for the scribes and Pharisees, the powerful elite of his day, but they will not dance with him. However, the fishermen, the regular folks, the Jameses and Johns, the Marys and Marthas, they come to him "and the dance went on."

"I danced on the Sabbath when I cured the lame" . . . now Jesus' dancing gets him into trouble, breaking the Sabbath law against work of any kind in order to make people well again. That sounds ridiculous to us now, but what laws and customs must we break today in order to bring life to others? Dancing with the Lord can be dangerous business. "They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high; and they left me there on a cross to die."

Ah, but the music has not ended. Even when it is Friday and the sky turns black, "it's hard to dance with the devil on your back," it is not over. "I am the dance, and I still go on." So, finally and for all time,

"They cut me down and I leapt up high, I am the life that'll never, never die;

I'll live in you if you'll live in me; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he."

Jesus the risen Christ dancing on top of the world . . . and he invites us to join him.

"Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he."

Dancing on top of the world as an image of the Resurrection; dancing with the Lord of the Dance as a metaphor for us living a faithful life.

That certainly is not obvious to Mary Magdalene on that early morning of the first day of the week when she goes to the tomb to tend to the corpse of Jesus. It is three days after the crucifixion, counting the Friday and the Sunday. Three days was the customary time people allowed to be certain that the person was, indeed, dead. But when she gets there, the stone had been rolled away from the cave serving as a tomb, and it is empty.

She runs back to where the disciples are keeping a low profile, not wanting to attract the attention of the authorities who have killed their messiah, and cries out, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him," a perfectly logical conclusion. Peter and another disciple run to the tomb and confirm what Mary had seen, nothing but a linen cloth wadded up in a corner and a shroud that had covered the face rolled up and lying by itself. John writes that the nameless disciple sees this and believes, but he does not tell us what the disciple believes since rising from the dead is incomprehensible to him; then, the two disciples return home.

Mary Magdalene had returned to the tomb with the disciples, and now she lingers there, weeping. She looks back into the tomb and sees what she had not seen before, two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask her. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." First, they kill him, and then they steal his body, indignity added to atrocity.

She turns away from the open tomb and sees another figure standing there who asks the same question. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Now comes one of the greatest phrases in the Bible, the most dramatic, though understandable, case of mistaken identity in human history, "Supposing him to be the gardener . . ." "The risen Lord does not look like Jeffrey Hunter to her, either, no resplendent gown, no shining face, no glowing halo. He looks like a common laborer, rather scruffy. She says, "Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Mary Magdalene, devoted to the task to the very end.

Jesus says, "Mary!" And her heart leaps! Her heart begins to dance even before her feet. Her savior is alive, and in that moment of hearing her name, "Mary," it is music to her ears, and night turns into day, sorrow into joy, and mourning into dancing. Here begins a new rhythm to life that will start in earnest in Galilee and spread throughout the region and eventually throughout time and space to us here and now.

The dance is timeless, and it is not a matter of technique. The man stomping on the pedestal on top of the Glastonbury Tor would have won no competition on "Dancing With the Stars." But that is of no concern. We all are invited to join the one who made the stars, who danced in the morning when the world was begun, the one who danced in the moon and the stars and the sun, with the one who came down to earth to invite us to join in the dance of life.

What does that dance look like for you and me? It will look very different for each of us; it will have a very different rhythm at different times in our lives. But the resurrected Christ comes to tell us that the dance goes on. The invitation is to join him in dancing on top of the world.

"Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he."

"Mary! Let's dance!"

Amen.