**Almost everyone loves a good mystery—to answer a riddle, negotiate a maze, or resolve a crossword. We are delighted when we can figure out a criminal investigation before Matlock, Sherlock Holmes or Jessica Fletcher. When my kids were young, they spent countless afternoons lost in ‘Where’s Waldo?’ books, searching for the red and white hat and glasses. Mysteries inspire engineers, philosophers, authors, mathematicians and astronauts. When there is a question, most of us want to get to the bottom of it.**

*We can enter the Easter story through any number of doors—bereavement, victory, redemption, healing, hope, transformation, proclamation–but this year I invite you to enter it through the door of mystery.*

 **We can enter the Easter story through any number of doors—bereavement, victory, redemption, healing, hope, transformation, proclamation–but this year I invite you to enter it through the door of mystery. (pause) Something feels missing, and we must find it. Where are the sunrise, surprises, new life, and born again promises of spring and faith? How do we find the ‘Up from the Grave he Arose,’ when we feel stuck in a Good Friday pandemic? We have sheltered in place all winter, and just as Easter dawns, we continue to shelter in place. And the Lentiest of Lents continues.**

 **My grandson just finished his first encounter with C. S. Lewis’ children’s classic, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, an allegory of the Passion story. The book begins with a frozen Narnia, where it is always winter, but never Christmas. Hope pokes through the snow as news is whispered, “Aslan is on the move…” Aslan is the Lion, the Christ figure, who will end the Narnian winter of captivity.**

 **Hooray for Narnia, but what about us? Who will deliver us from this year’s ‘always Lent and never Easter?’ How do we come alive again? Is God on the move here, today? If so, how? Where in the world is ‘Death in vain forbids him rise; Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia?’ Where, indeed. Let us find it together…**

 **Read: John 20:1-18.**

 **We know from the accounts of the other gospel writers that Mary Magdalene was not alone on her journey to the tomb. There were two, three, perhaps several women, clustered for this early morning walk. I find it interesting that none of the male disciples of Jesus were a part of this, only the women. They were going to the tomb to prepare Jesus’ body for a proper burial—not the hasty, well-intentioned efforts of Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus, expediting burial rites before the start of Sabbath. They were going to do it right, offer respect, bathe the body, anoint with burial spices, and find closure.**

*“Who will roll the stone away?”*

 **“Who will roll the stone away?” they ask no one in particular. But that hurdle is forgotten as they discover that someone must have arrived before them. The stone has been rolled aside, to let someone in, or out, or both. And so the great mystery begins. Where is the body of Christ?**

 **John tells us that Mary Magdalene did a 360, running to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple (probably John) to report, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him.” Who exactly? Who has taken the body of Jesus? Joseph of Arimethea? Nicodemus? The Roman Guard by Pilate’s order? Caiaphas, the High Priest and his minions? The cemetery gardener? An ally? An enemy? The questions jog faster than Jesus’ followers.**

 **The tomb is empty, but so are the explanations for what has transpired. John claims that the beloved disciple ‘saw and believed,’ but then he writes, “They didn’t yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead.” At best, their theories were punctuated by question marks rather than exclamation points.**

 **“Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying.” Please take note of this; because, if we are honest, she represents each and every one of us. She is the one grieving over the loss of someone dearly loved. She is the one anxious over how life is changing. She is the one looking for answers to explain mysteries beyond comprehension. She is the one who feels troubles piled upon troubles, weighing her down. She is the one worrying for her family, friends and people. And she is the one best positioned for encountering a miracle of Easter.**

 **As she takes a second look in the tomb, she sees two angels who ask her why she is crying. “They’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him,” she laments once more.**

 **In the gospel of Luke, the angels respond differently, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” they ask, “He is not here, but has risen.” Well now, that’s a horse of another color! Is the body of Christ gone because he is alive? Not zombie alive, but really alive? Alive like Lazarus, or Mary herself?**

 **Mary turns from the mysterious empty tomb to the very present Jesus, but she does not know it is Jesus, until he speaks her name, “Mary.” In that moment, Easter ignites her faith, and she cannot wait to tell the disciples!**

 **The mystery of Easter 2020 AD is not that far removed from the mystery of Easter 30, more or less, AD. I was speaking to a colleague the other day about my Easter message and she observed, “The tomb was empty; the church is empty—but Easter still dawns!” She may be on to something, but the mystery requires a fuller denouement.**

 **In 1951, the composer Meredith Willson (Music Man fame) published an Easter song called, “It’s Easter Time.” It begins with an odd lyric: “A pleasant little fellow came from Mars to pay a visit, and he remained all winter through. Each Sunday he’d proceed to a diff-rent church or creed and he always found himself an empty pew or two. In fact he often noticed quite a few. Then on a certain Sunday morn he started out as always and ev’ry face he passed was shining bright, and the churches bulged with people and a song from ev’ry steeple filled his little Martian heart with such delight that he joined the glad refrain with all his might. It’s Easter time! The bells on the hill are ringing, ringing once again. There’s a smile on the face of this weary world that seems to say: Amen!”**

 **Regardless of how secular our world has become, the image of the ‘bulging church on Easter Sunday’ has endured. Until now. For the first time in its annual Easter celebration, the United Methodist Church of Auburn sanctuary (and almost every sanctuary in the United States) is empty. Our sanctuary is beautiful, incidentally, with the new chancel wall completed and ready for dedication, but it is bereft of the one thing that truly makes it ‘church,’ the people, who are, in fact, the Body of Christ.**

 **Like Mary, I arrived early this morning, asking the same question, “Where is the Body of Christ?” The mystery begins again. It was here when last I checked, but now it is not. Who took it away and what have they done with it? We begin to list persons of interest. Pastor? District Superintendent? Bishop? Police chief? Mayor? Governor? President? Maybe it’s not a person at all. Maybe it’s something more insidious. COVID-19 perhaps?**

 **“How terribly sad that a global pandemic would take the Body of Christ out of the chapels on Easter!” we lament. And in truth, we do grieve our loss of traditional Easter expression, though it pales when compared with the loss of life and economic capacity many have suffered. But there is another way to look at the Body of Christ this Easter (and I don’t mean taping a picture of each congregant in the pew where they sit—though that was a remarkably creative idea).**

 **The truth is, like Mary, we also encounter the Body of Christ, often without recognition. For years, pastors have preached about how important it is to ‘get the salt out of the saltshaker and into the world,’ or to be more obvious, ‘to get the Church out of the building and into the world.’ And here we are!**

 **“Yes,” someone might object, “but we’re doing it from behind masks or while sheltering in place.” Yes, that is true. But we are doing it nonetheless. We are the Body of Christ unleashed in a hurting world, caring for the sick, bringing food to the hungry, proclaiming release to captives, giving sight to the blind, proclaiming good news, and yes, raising the dead to life.**

 **Let me illustrate by sharing some of my encounters with the Body of Christ this week. I opened the door Monday morning and discovered a gift of spring. Mary MacMahon had delivered pussy willows and candles as a follow-up to her virtual Godly Play Church School class. Throughout the week, cards of Easter celebration arrived from members of the parish. On Tuesday, after applying for church payroll protection, Joel Irish graciously tutored me on the administration of Zoom meetings.**

 **Later that evening, I realized that a hand injury sustained on Monday was escalating to cellulitis, so I went to the ER at St. Mary’s. I received immediate and compassionate care, and was delighted to discover that my nurse was praying for my recovery. When the ER doctor discharged me several hours later, he described my recovery as ‘miraculous.’ I attribute that to the prayers offered by my nurse, wife and children. I called my sister and discovered that her beloved cat Shaina had died. I prayed for her and she prayed for me.**

 **Throughout the week, I interacted on-line and by phone with parishioners, colleagues and friends. I heard stories from those ‘checking in’ on others, from those delivering meals to school-age children, from those advocating for safety in the workplace, from those on the front line of healthcare. I received beautiful reports from Leroy Brown and Lee Upton on the effective protocols in place for distributing food through the High Street Food Cupboard ministry. Seventy families found a life-line through that vital work this past Thursday!**

 **I made a trip to the grocery store where a masked pastor met a masked Steve Jamrog across the Easter hams and learned of the masks he was making for healthcare workers and the blood donation he had given earlier that morning. I was blessed Friday night by the inspired meditations offered by Wanda Sprague, Kim Visbaras and Joel Irish at our Good Friday Zoom service.**

 **Saturday morning, I received a call from Bishop Devadhar expressing concern over my trip to the ER. Later, I received an email from Bill Buzza and Beth Labrie offering videoclips of Easter praise to post on our church facebook page and website, with the help of Megan Spiller and John Derouche. Even now, I am grateful for Len Lednum who is helping me film this worship broadcast of Easter celebration.**

 **Where is the Body of Christ? Honestly, it is everywhere I turn, even as I shelter in place. The only real mystery is “Why don’t I recognize the Jesus in front of me more often?” Is that your Easter mystery too?**