

Easter Sermon – “Out of the Box”
Scripture Reading – John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Listen to the events of the first Easter morning as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 20.
Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 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 Christ 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? For whom are you looking?" 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 the Risen Christ had said these things to her. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Outside the Box”

The text: *Mary Magdalene said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” John 20:2b*

Let us pray. Risen God, on this joyous morning, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Little did Mary Magdalene know that first Easter morning when she discovered Jesus “out of the tomb,” that she was a witness to the birth of a faith that was truly *outside the box*. The idea of a dying and rising God was absurd, nonsensical, fictitious, impossible! Perhaps even more unfathomable and out of the box is the concept of a God who would join us in our humanity, welcome those on the outside who are marginalized, challenge the narrow perspective of the religious elite, absorb the hostility of the world in an unjustified sentence on

the cross, and walk out of the box which contained him to announce to the world that hatred, bigotry, and death do not have the last word.

The phrase thinking *outside the box* means to explore ideas that are creative, extraordinary, and not limited or controlled by rules or tradition.

The expression “thinking outside the box” has its beginnings in a famous puzzle created by an early 20th century British mathematician Henry Ernest Dudeney. The puzzle asks one to connect nine dots on a three-by-three grid, using four straight lines without the pencil leaving the page.

In his 1969 Chicago Tribune column, Norman Vincent Peale, Reformed Church of America pastor and author of the bestseller The Power of Positive Thinking, referenced the popular Nine Dots Puzzle to propose the metaphor of *thinking outside the box*. He wrote:

“You can work on that puzzle, but the only way to solve it is to draw the lines, so they connect outside the box. It's so simple once you realize the principle behind it. Yet, if you keep trying to solve it inside the box, you'll never be able to master that puzzle.

That puzzle represents the way a lot of people think,” according to Rev. Peale. “They get caught up inside the box of their own lives. You've got to approach any problem objectively. Stand back and see it for exactly what it is. From a little distance, you can see it a lot more clearly. Try and get a different perspective, a fresh point of view. Step *outside the box* your problem has created within you and come at it from a different direction.”

Rev. Peale underscores the paradox of gaining insight from the outside.

Peter and I began talking about the courage and innovation of those who live and think outside the box when he recently read an obituary in the New York Times. Without much fanfare, the Olympic high jump champion who taught the world to rise up and soar died last month. As a freshman in high school and the worst jumper on his team, Richard Fosbury thought outside the box, worked with his own strengths, and taught himself to jump backwards, headfirst, and belly up over the high bar.

Although coaches discouraged his outside the box technique and spectators gasped, chuckled, even mocked him during his early jumps, in 1968 Fosbury set an Olympic record and revolutionized the high jump. On the podium, Fosbury acted outside the box once again, holding up his clenched fist in an act of solidarity with fellow black Olympians advocating for equality during the height of the civil rights movement. He continued to live outside the box throughout his lifetime serving others as a civil engineer, a progressive politician, and an advocate for world peace.

Fosbury would say to his supporters, “Life is a gift, and we need to use what God gives.” Despite the negative connotation of its name, the story behind the “Fosbury Flop” inspires us to excel in our God-given gifts and symbolizes venturing outside the box with ingenuity, resourcefulness, and gratitude.

On this Day of Resurrection, let us take to heart the life of Richard Fosbury and find ways to turn our weakness into strength. Let us have the courage to go all in outside the box, backwards, headfirst, and belly up, and rise to the high bar of God's call to be our best and give our all for one another. And when we find ourselves on the podium of life, by the grace

of God, may we have the integrity to lift our voices and to hold out our hands in solidarity with those brothers and sisters who continue to be marginalized, oppressed, and demeaned in our world today.

As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and proclaim with Christians around the world the good news of our Risen *outside-the-box* God, may we take to heart the words of Norman Vincent Peale and not get caught up inside the box of our own lives. Rather, let us seek a little distance outside the imaginary lines that separate and divide us to get a different perspective and a fresh point of view. May we give ourselves the distance we need to see who we are more clearly, to recognize our need for redemption, and to embrace the perspective of the One who saves us.

Like Mary Magdalene, standing outside the box of the tomb, may we be open to hear our Savior speak our name and send us to proclaim the good news of who our Risen God is. The good news does not deny that suffering, sacrifice, and death will be a part of each of our lives. The good news affirms that our Risen *outside-the-box* God has the ingenuity, mercy, and love to bring life out of death, salvation out of sacrifice, and redemption out of suffering.

Mary Magdalene said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb..."

Christ, our Savior, is out and risen indeed. Hallelujah! Amen.