April 1, 2018

John 20:1-18

Hope in the Wilderness

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John 20 1:1-18 New Revised Standard Version

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. 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.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 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.’” 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.

For the last six weeks of Lent we have been on a journey in the wilderness. We live in a Good Friday world where there is evil and suffering and yet today we proclaim the hope of Easter. We live in a world where there is so much fear and we try to be brave. That’s why I love the way the scripture begins, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb …”

Like us, Mary Magdalene lived in a Good Friday world. On that great Palm parade day, the week before, there was such promise and hope. Everyone was shouting “Hosanna” as Jesus was riding into Jerusalem. Everyone was so joyful and filled with hope. And then it all went to pieces. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied him, most of the disciples scattered in fear. All of the people who had shouted, “Hosanna” got caught up in the fear and the group-think and the political power struggle that they shouted “Crucify!”.

Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried in the tomb. John’s words, “while it was still dark,” are a profound understatement of just how dark it felt to Mary Magdalene and the others, and how they felt it might be that dark forever. And yet, while it was still dark, Mary decided to go to Jesus’ tomb. When she arrived, the stone had been rolled away. She thought someone had desecrated the grave of Jesus. Was it not enough they had humiliated him? Was it not enough they had killed him? Was it not enough they had won? Mary ran back to the male disciples who were all still in hiding, locked up in their own dark rooms of fear and guilt, and she told them what had happened. Jesus is gone and we don’t know where he is.

It was still dark, but Peter and the beloved disciple go to see for themselves. The tomb is empty and the grave clothes that had bound Jesus’ hands, feet, and head are rolled up neatly, and nothing makes any sense. Who takes off the burial clothes before removing a body? Who folds things up when desecrating a grave? Peter and the other disciple do not understand. It was so early and it was still so dark. They couldn’t see past the pain of Good Friday. Peter and the other disciple go back home and lock the doors behind them.

But Mary couldn’t leave Jesus’ tomb, and she wept. Mary’s eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw a glimmer of something in the tomb. She bent down and saw strangers sitting where Jesus’ body had been laid. Mary didn’t know who they were, and they brought her no comfort.

Mary was living in a Good Friday world, and everyone knows you don’t see angels in a Good Friday world; you only see strangers. You don’t feel comfort in a Good Friday world; you only feel threat. You don’t greet people with kindness in a Good Friday world; you only peer at them through eyes dimmed by suspicion and mistrust. When you live only in a Good Friday world, when that is your only perspective and your eyes have gotten too used to the dark and you’re crying over a stolen body, a stolen hope, a stolen promise, then everyone you meet is not a potential friend but, rather, they are a potential thief. Even two angels sitting in an empty tomb.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. In the most restrained response ever, Mary says, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary turns to leave and someone is blocking her way. John’s Gospel tells us it was the risen Jesus, but Mary has grown so used to the dark that she can’t see who it is. The heaviness of the dark, the constant gloom, had completely changed her perspective so the only thing she saw was a stranger blocking her way, someone who looked suspicious, a possible thief. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” You can hear the heartbreak in her voice. Help me get Jesus’ body back where it is supposed to be so we can be done with all of this. Let’s get back to the way it is now, the way of Good Friday and darkness and pain, so we can get adjusted to it and learn how to survive in it.

Jesus did not want Mary, and Jesus does not want us to get adjusted to our Good Friday world. Jesus did not want Mary, and Jesus does not want us to only have the perspective that is defined by loss, a sense of deep dark, and the stories that are on the news. Because of what happened in that tomb, because of God’s willingness to absorb all of our human experience, even abandonment and death, into God’s own self, that Good Friday vision did not get to pretend to win anymore. Death lost its sting.

Jesus longed for Mary to be able to see and to trust that claim. So he did the one thing he knew that would clear her eyes:  Jesus called her name, “Mary,” and by doing so, he transformed what she saw; he changed her whole life. John’s Gospel says, “She turned.” She physically turned back towards Jesus’ voice, but she also turned in her perspective, her vision, and what she was now able to see because of Jesus’ living presence and power. Mary turned and she recognized Jesus. Then Mary did what we all try to do after experiencing a powerful moment of transformation. She went from seeing resurrection and confessing her faith, to trying to grab it and contain it with both hands.

Jesus had to remind her that she could not do that. He reminded her that she had a job to do. Now that she had experienced the gift of this new Easter perspective, the gift of being able to see moments of resurrection and possibility and new life in all kinds of people, she had a job to do. Mary could see how people living ordinary lives were working alongside God, transforming the world by their kindness, their acts of justice, their generosity towards each other and towards strangers, their willingness to speak up for those afraid, their ability to listen to each other without yelling. Mary had to go and tell. She had to give voice to her new perspective, to her new vision.

Mary was called to be a midwife of hope to everyone that she encountered. Biblical hope is a choice. It is a decision and an action based on faith. Hope is the engine of change, the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another. Hope is what gives us the courage to keep fighting for all people to be whole and safe. Hope is what the risen Jesus gave to Mary the moment he chose to appear to her, to call out her name, and to clear her eyes from the perspective of death and darkness, and to charge her to go and tell the others.

Mary is a midwife of hope called to share the story of our living God who is on the loose still at work in this world here and now, healing, restoring, making whole. She is charged with sharing her story of how transformation and possibility are happening everywhere so that others might stop only viewing their lives and their world through the Good Friday perspective of death and destruction. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, that perspective no longer got to pretend to win. The perspective of violence had lost its power and claim over us forever. Mary’s charge was to live, to proclaim, and to trust that Easter transformation promise with everything she had.

That is our charge, too. Like Mary, we are charged, called, to first let God clear our own eyes so that we also stop only seeing our world and ourselves from the perspective of death and destruction and the deep dark of Good Friday. We, like Mary, are charged, called, to actively turn from that perspective, that way of being in our world, even on those days when we have to do it every few minutes. Because of what God has done in Jesus, we, like Mary, have also been given this gift of transformed perspective, of Easter vision. We, like Mary, have been given this gift of being able to decide hope and to live tough, resilient Easter hope.

We don’t have this Easter hope because we are in denial of the ongoing struggles in our world. We trust that Easter has come and that our risen Lord is still on the loose in this world, working out God’s transformation and mercy and justice alongside us, even using us. Jesus still calls our names, usually through the voices of each one of you, and still hopes we might recognize him and then summon the courage Mary had to go and to tell and to live. Because the truth of Easter is that it is not just about what happened with Jesus that day, and it’s not just about what happens when our own tombs are sealed. Easter is what is happening right here, right now, all the time.

It is hard to proclaim Easter in a Good Friday world. But it is no longer a Good Friday world. It is an Easter world, a world being made new, a world that belongs only to God and that God will never abandon, a world God is determined to love into complete transformation for all God’s people, for all God’s creation. A world filled with hope. And we are called to actively live in the Easter world!

Christ the Lord is Risen. Christ the Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

Benediction Let us now go forth into the world in peace; being of good courage; holding fast to that which is good; rendering to no one evil for evil; strengthening the faint hearted; supporting the weak; helping the afflicted; honoring all people; loving and serving the Lord and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.