

April 12, 2020
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John 20:1-18 While It Was Still Dark
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 20:1-18

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.

There are different stories of that Easter morning in the Gospels. In Matthew's Gospel, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb and there is a great earthquake and an angel descends from heaven and rolls back the stone and sits on top of it. Then, Jesus appears and the women talk with him. In Luke's Gospel, the women go to the tomb, the stone has already been rolled away, and two men in dazzling clothes appear to tell them about Jesus. We heard John's Gospel where Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been removed. She runs to tell the disciples and the disciples go to the tomb to check it out. They find the empty tomb, the linen wrappings rolled up, and the disciples believe that Jesus' body is gone but they don't understand so they return to their homes. Mary is still weeping outside the tomb and talks to Jesus but she thinks he is the gardener. In Matthew, Luke, and John, the women go tell the disciples about Jesus' resurrection.

Mark's Gospel is my favorite. The earliest versions of Mark's Gospel end with Mark chapter 16, verse 8 where the women run away from the empty tomb as quickly as they can, not saying a single word to anyone about what they had seen and heard. In Mark's Gospel we as the reader know who Jesus is, but no one else gets it, especially the disciples. In Mark's Gospel the story ends with no one knowing that Jesus has been resurrected. It is up to us as the reader to tell because if we don't, no one will know. Christ is risen, and we are the only ones left to spread that good news. Because of fear and silence, we are the ones called to speak the power of Easter. We are the ones now charged with proclaiming that Jesus is on the loose healing, restoring, making whole. Jesus is still at work just as he told us he would be.

I love that women are so prominent in our Easter story. Women had been some of Jesus' most faithful followers. The male disciples had betrayed Jesus or denied him or ran away when the soldiers showed up. The women followed Jesus to the cross where they kept vigil at his crucifixion, praying and weeping as Jesus drew his last breath. And on the day after the Sabbath, the women wanted to care for Jesus' body in the tomb. They woke up early, brought the appropriate spices, and walked to the cemetery. They were searching for closure. But I imagine

they couldn't talk about Jesus' death, it was too raw. So they focused on details. They focused on the tasks to be done after someone dies. Who was going to let the others know about Jesus' death? Who was going to call the florist? Where should the memorials go? Definitely to their local church. They had to finish writing up the obituary. And Jesus had not written a will so there were many questions. Would it have to go through probate. Who would inherit?

As the women walked, I wonder if they were a tiny bit relieved? Following Jesus had gotten harder and harder for them. Jesus was constantly asking things of them, questioning the ways they had always lived their lives, encouraging them to take risks and to lift up the weakest and most defenseless people. He was forcing them out of their comfort zones.

What about the disciples? Were they also relieved? Being a disciple of Jesus was exhausting. And now that Jesus was dead, they were off the hook for living like he wanted them to. They could go back to the way things had been before they had seen the world through Jesus' eyes. They could go back to making an uneasy peace with the way things are: the gap between the rich and the poor, the reality of domestic abuse and violence, the existence of slaves and masters. Now that their dream of God's reign with Jesus had died, they could go back to life as usual.

Was life without the presence of their crucified Lord heartbreaking and terribly disappointing? Yes. But was life without the presence of their crucified Lord easier and less controversial? Yes. If Jesus is in the tomb and the obituary is in the paper, then you go back to living the life of this world. With Jesus in the tomb, things could now go back to their old version of normal.

This year Easter doesn't feel very normal. We didn't have our usual youth sunrise worship. There wasn't a potluck breakfast or a crazy egg hunt. We didn't sing the Hallelujah Chorus or have our sanctuary filled with our beautiful choir. We won't get to all go out to brunch or take pictures in our Easter best by the flower filled wreath on the cross here at church. I miss the Easter that I have known at Greenland Hills and I grieve so much for our world today.

The Easter story starts with grief, so maybe it is fitting if we do too. Jesus, the teacher, healer, storyteller, miracle worker, and friend, was dead. Three days dead. Beyond hope dead and the hope of salvation and triumph that people celebrated and begged for the week before was gone.

I love how John's Gospel begins, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." While it was still dark. That's how Mary started her day, before dawn, dark, desperate. She expected to find the body of Jesus secure in the tomb, but someone had taken it. Peter and the other disciple go to check out Mary's story. No one stopped and said, "Remember, Jesus said he would resurrect the temple on the third day and he was really talking about himself, so he's probably going to walk through the door any minute, so we should just wait here." No one said it because no one expected it. The disciples weren't looking for what Jesus predicted. They weren't looking for hope or life. They were looking for what they expected. They went looking to soothe their hopelessness by staying close to death.

For the fifty days of Easter we are going to be talking about hope. How do you have hope when it is hard to imagine life ever going back to the way that it was before? How do you have hope when people have lost jobs, people have lost their lives, and every day we learn of more people who are sick?

We have hope because the cross is not the end of the story. Fear and death are not the end of the story. Not for Jesus and not for us. Betrayal can be overcome, justice does prevail, and sacrifice can lead to redemption. God gives life to the dead. Christ is risen and is on the loose in

our homes, in our city, and in our world.

We cannot roll the stone back in front of the tomb and keep Jesus contained. Jesus is God with us, God here on earth, and Jesus is alive. Jesus is calling us to join him in proclaiming God's Easter yes to our Good Friday looking world. Jesus is calling us to be open to seeing the new thing God is doing. After the male disciples go back home, Mary couldn't leave the tomb. She wept and wept and she looked in the empty tomb again. She sees two angels in white sitting where Jesus' body had been, but she doesn't see them as angels. She didn't know who they were and they brought her no comfort. You don't see angels when you live in a Good Friday world, you only see strangers. You don't feel comfort in a Good Friday world, you only feel threatened. You don't greet people with kindness in a Good Friday world, you only glance at them with suspicion and mistrust. In a Good Friday world, everyone is a potential thief instead of a potential friend.

Mary is so fixed on what she thought would might be that when she does see Jesus, she doesn't even recognize him. She was so ready to see the dead man they had buried that she couldn't even imagine seeing the living Jesus before her. So, Jesus calls Mary by name. He recognizes her and names her. As soon as he said, "Mary!" she knew it was Jesus. I love how John's Gospel says she turned. Yes, she probably physically turned towards Jesus' voice, but she also turned in her perspective, in her vision. She was now able to see because of Jesus' living presence and power. Jesus was alive, and nothing could go back to normal. Her whole world was transformed.

I wish I could say, it's Easter, and everything will be wonderful again. To journey with Jesus is exactly that, a journey. Jesus wants us to go to the next place, to the next person, to the next miracle. Jesus wants us to keep growing in faithfulness and understanding. If we had Jesus all figured out, we would probably just walk away and do things on our own. To journey with Jesus is to be dependent on him as a teacher and mentor who helps us to grow and take our next steps to do the next right thing.

Easter is not the same this year. We meet on facebook, youtube, or zoom. We have groceries delivered. We cannot hug each other. We cannot shop by rambling through the store. We don't get to dress up in our Easter clothes and have our egg hunt. You are at home and we are here. As we face Easter in this new way, maybe for the first time, we can understand the grief, fear, confusion and wonder that the disciples felt. Jesus had faced the worst and had conquered death. Christ is risen and he will walk alongside us as we muddle our way through our own grief, fear, confusion and wonder. May we turn to Christ, as Mary did, embracing the new vision and accepting that our whole world has changed. May we be shocked by the newness of what Jesus reveals to us this week in unexpected places, unexpected times, and in unexpected ways. People working alongside God, transforming the world by their kindness, their acts of justice, their generosity towards others, their willingness to speak up for those afraid. May we have eyes to see the risen Christ all around us. Hope isn't simply a feeling that we have or a mood that we conjure up. Hope, biblical hope, is an action of faith. Hope is the door from one reality to another. It is transformation. Christ is risen, thanks be to God, Amen.