

Luke 24:1-12, 52-53

New Revised Standard Version

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

On this beautiful Easter morning there is so much for us to be grateful for. I am grateful that you are worshipping here right now. I am grateful to be a part of a church family that throws open its doors in welcome and love. I am grateful that new babies are being born in this church family! I am grateful for the twenty year relationship between Greenland Hills and Narcotics Anonymous. On Monday I was honored to preside at a funeral for one of the members from NA. Person after person came up to me to thank this church and all of you for literally saving their lives. Every single day Greenland Hills provides a safe place for the recovery community.

What are you grateful for? If you were to make a list (and what a great activity that would be today), what would top your list?

Today is Easter when we celebrate Christ is risen! God's grace calls us to lives of gratitude. For the last forty days of Lent we have been focusing on spiritual practices to help center ourselves in God as we experienced and practiced prayer, scripture reading, fasting, confession, worship, and silence in our daily lives. During this time of uncertainty in our world when we don't know what to do, we go back to the basics of spiritual disciplines. When we don't know what to do, spiritual practices help connect us with God and can help us to experience God in new ways.

We heard the story of the women coming to anoint Jesus' body with the spices they had prepared. Jesus had died on Friday, why did they wait until Sunday to go to his tomb? Why not go sooner? They rested on their Sabbath which was Saturday. The women lived lives of spiritual rhythm, their days and weeks and habits formed by the practices of their faith. Their spiritual disciplines put them in the right place at the right time to discover *and recognize* that the miracle of resurrection had taken place. Their spiritual disciplines, rather than fear or sadness, shaped their responses to the event of Jesus' death. Regardless of how they felt, the women were disciplined enough to do what needed to be done. That led them to the right place, at the right time.

We know how valuable cultivating an attitude of gratitude can be in our lives. Practicing gratitude is a popular thing. We can buy gratitude journals. We can find gratitude meditations. We have seen research that gratitude makes people happier.¹ Gratitude comes from the Latin word for grace, graciousness and gratefulness. Gratitude comes out of the recognition that what we receive is not something we've earned or deserve – it is pure gift – grace. Easter is the primary event of God's grace to humanity. As we celebrate Easter, we can learn to live in

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

response to grace through the practice of gratitude. The other spiritual disciplines we have looked at during Lent, prayer, scripture reading, fasting, confession, worship, and silence, prepare us to be attentive to and aware of the moments and gifts of grace that God gives us every day.

Resurrection takes the women, and later Peter and others, by surprise. While the women go to the tomb to attend to the dead body of Jesus, God surprises them with the exact opposite, with resurrection and life. The only way they can respond is in surprise, wonder and awe. The disciples didn't believe the women at first. Peter immediately runs to the tomb, eager to see what the women are talking about. When he does, he too becomes amazed. Then Luke shares about the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It takes some time for them to recognize the risen Jesus for who he is. Even though they tell the rest of the disciples about Jesus' resurrection, they are still startled and terrified when Jesus shows up in person. Of course, anyone would be terrified if a dead person appeared to them alive! Jesus appears at different times and in different ways to different people. Jesus and the grace offered through him are always unexpected – grace breaks into our lives as a gift, unexpected and yet welcome.

The disciples are initially shocked at Jesus' resurrection, and come to understand it as the gift of repentance with a change of mind and heart and forgiveness of sins. They respond in gratitude, not just for a moment but as a new way of life. Our scripture passage tells us, "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Gratitude becomes not just something we express, but part of who we are. Our disciplines bring us to a place where we trust that God will do something, and we are grateful to be a part of it.

Gratitude is a natural response to receiving a gift. But our lives are busy, so we don't always recognize God's gifts to us. The hope is that as our lives continue to be shaped by spiritual disciplines, we can become more attentive and aware of how God is moving in our lives. Today is a day when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and how it opens each and every one of us up to new life in both big and small ways.

This Easter Sunday how can we intentionally practice gratitude not only in response to the gift of new life from Jesus but also to tune more into the grace we live in each and every day. We can see the evidence of life around us, there are new babies, blooming flowers, chirping baby birds, even when we are in the midst of sorrow, grief, and death. We can practice gratitude by keeping a gratitude journal, listing a few things each day that we are thankful for, sending someone a thank you note or calling them to say thank you, or praying prayers of thanksgiving.

Gratitude is joyful. It is the joyful response to the gifts God gives us. We express our gratitude here at Greenland Hills by sharing in Communion together, by giving back to God through the offering, by volunteering in mission and ministry, and through prayers of thanksgiving.

There was a recent popular miniseries on Disney+ called *WandaVision*. It follows two of characters from the Marvel universe, that's the one with Hulk, Iron Man, Spiderman, that kind of thing. Vision is a kind of super powerful robot/android with the capacity to feel and love. Wanda is a super powerful witch. The series takes place after Vision, the husband of this pair, dies. In her extreme grief, Wanda creates an entire miniature world where Vision is alive, and they are living happily together in the style of sitcoms through the decades, think *I Love Lucy*, *Dick Van Dyke*, *Malcolm in the Middle*. The downside is Wanda did this by taking over and controlling the minds of an entire town of people. I know it's a little complicated and confusing but those of us who watched the show were confused for a long time!

It is a show about a husband and wife with superpowers. The husband dies, and the wife in her grief uses witchcraft and mind control to take over a town so her husband can be alive. It is a show about grief. One of the most powerful lines from the show was from Vision, the super powerful robot/android. He says, "What is grief, if not love persevering?" As Christians we have the hope of resurrection, of new life. This Easter Day I feel God wrapping us in a loving embrace, wiping away our tears and assuring us that we are not alone. God never lets death have the final word.

The cross teaches me that God's abundant grace is standing with each and every one of us in our broken world. God is present with us in all of it. God pursues us and saves us with relentless love and ultimately will enter the grave and the very stench of death in order to say even here, even here I will not be without you. We see divorces, illnesses, deaths, bankruptcies, evictions, homelessness, mental breakdowns, joblessness, and so much pain. Through it all God is staying with us, loving us, teaching us, serving us, feeding us, and yearning to be with us. God loves us right to the end. When we wonder how Jesus can be near to us when we are grieving and hurting, this week is our answer. Joy comes in the morning; thanks be to God. Amen.