

John 20:1-18

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 he 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? 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." 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 he had said these things to her.

“The Last Laugh”
Rev. Leanne Thompson
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So, earlier today the kids had an Easter Egg hunt around the church. They shouldn't be the only ones to have a little bit of fun today. So, for you adults who would like to feel like kids again – those of you who think a little chocolate might make it easier to sit through a sermon – I've hidden something special for you in the sanctuary. There just might be an Easter Egg or two hidden out there in the pews. So, take a minute and look around. You aren't finding them? You might need to look a little harder. Still nothing? April Fools! That's just mean isn't it? Taunting you with chocolate? I just couldn't resist. I mean, its Easter, but its also April Fools day. And its good lead in to the story I have to tell you today about someone else who went looking for something she didn't find.

Her day began in darkness: the darkness of pre-dawn when she made her way to the tomb; the darkness of grief that had consumed her in the hours following the death of Jesus. She could have waited until it was light to make her journey, but it wouldn't have made any difference. Grief had sucked all the light and color from her world. Even if the sun had been shining, its rays could not have penetrated the shadows in which she walked. Jesus was dead, and nothing would ever be the same again. There was no more hope; there was no more joy.

There was love. Always there was love. The love was real. The love was so real that Jesus was willing to die for those he loved. He had said as much, that his death was necessary, and that it was for them that he gave up his life. The love was real; and that is why it hurt so much to lose him. She loved him; and he was gone. And so, in the darkness, she made her way to the place where he was, so she could be with him in her grief. She went to sit in the garden by his tomb in the dark.

How many of us have sat in the darkness, overcome with worry, or grief? How many of us have known the kind of brokenness that haunts our hearts and minds in the long pre-dawn hours when we can't sleep, but we can't be awake either? How many of us have lost someone we love and felt the pain of their absence? I think that its safe to say most of us. Even the children among us have been driven to a parent's bedroom in the middle of the night to seek comfort and respite from a fear of the dark, or of a sound outside the window.

If you've been there, if you can remember a time when you were longing for comfort in the darkness, then you understand the state that Mary was in when she arrived at the tomb and discovered the stone had been moved and Jesus was gone.

It was an act of vandalism, or a cruel joke. Whatever the case, Mary wasn't laughing. She was weeping. After fetching Peter and John to see what she had seen, she sat outside the tomb and let the tears fall. Even after the others left, she remained weeping. So many tears.

Grief does that to us. It wrings us out and leaves us feeling empty inside, or angry, or desperate. I suspect Mary was feeling all of those things. Her life experiences up to that point had taught her that death was the end. And the empty tomb was a sucker punch when she was already feeling defeated. In her grief, she couldn't see the empty tomb as a sign of hope. It never crossed her mind to believe that the tomb was empty because Jesus was alive. Because that just wasn't possible.

Except, it was possible. Jesus was alive and standing beside her. And as he spoke her name, she recognized him. In that moment, the light and the color came flooding back into her world. There was suddenly a new possibility that she had never imagined. It was possible for life to triumph over death, for light to overcome darkness. In a heartbeat, Mary's mourning has turned to dancing, her sorrow has turned to joy. She is no longer weeping in sorrow but laughing in wonder at the miracle she has witnessed. She has seen the risen Lord. And that changes everything. Hope has returned; joy has returned; love has won.

That is the big picture celebration of Easter Sunday. But there is a subtle wonder that I don't want us to miss. The capital "T" truth is that Jesus has been resurrected. But, so has Mary. Jesus didn't have to stick around to meet her in the garden. He had died; he had risen, defeating death; he could have already ascended to heaven and claimed his rightful throne. But love wouldn't let him leave her in despair. He could have rushed off to celebrate; instead he pauses to breathe life into someone who is feeling dead inside.

Friends, this is Resurrection: the risen Lord meeting us in our darkness and offering us new life. Jesus wasn't resurrected for himself; he was resurrected for us. He rose again to give us hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of our darkness. And I think sometimes that is really hard for us to believe.

The resurrection is incredibly life-giving *and* it is incredibly challenging. We want to believe; we want an end to tears and suffering; we want more than the darkness of the tomb. But we aren't used to looking for life among the tombstones. Like Mary, we don't know how to see miraculous possibilities in the midst of our impossibly challenging reality. And, like Mary, we have a powerful testimony to offer about the way our lives are changed when Jesus meets us in our darkness, calls us by name, and breaths life into us when we are feeling dead inside.

This is what Easter is all about folks. This is what being a Christian is all about. So, I have a challenge for everyone here who claims to be a Christ follower, everyone who has been met in the darkness and pulled out of a grave in big ways or small: don't just talk about Easter this year; do Easter. Live like you believe love has won; live like you believe the impossible is possible. Follow in the footsteps of your Savior and look for those around you who feel dead inside so that you can speak words of life to them. Share your own good news about what you have witnessed Jesus doing in your life. Claim your hope and laugh in the face of despair. Spread light, and joy, every chance you get.

Let's begin right here today.

Turn to a person next to you, or behind you, or across the aisle. If you don't that person's name, introduce yourself.

Look that other person in the eye, and call that other person by name and repeat after me – we will do this twice so that each of you has an opportunity to speak and to listen:

(Name), you are a beloved child of God.
No matter how dark it gets,
The light of Jesus' love shines brighter.
You are not alone.
The resurrection is not an April Fool's joke.
We will look for hope and joy together.

May it be so every day of our lives until Christ returns in Glory!
Alleluia! Amen.