

## Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

I wish that I could see you this Easter Sunday, that I could look out from the pulpit at Church of the Good Shepherd, see you and listen as you respond, “The Lord is Risen, indeed, Alleluia” as is good and right and my favorite part of Easter Sunday. I miss you all, and it seems a little one-sided to proclaim Christ is Risen without hearing your response. It also feels a little lonely, even with my family here, and that is okay. It is okay to acknowledge how different this Easter Sunday feels, because we can’t be together in person to worship and celebrate Christ’s resurrection.

That difference might make today feel awkward or maybe a bit confusing, not unlike the first Easter morning, when even Jesus didn’t go to church.

Every Easter Sunday we read from John’s Gospel how Mary Magdalen went to the tomb where Jesus was buried very early in the morning. So early it was still dark. Now in John’s Gospel that is no small detail and it can and probably does have multiple meanings. It could mean it was literally dark because it was so early the sun was not out yet. The author of John’s Gospel might also be referring to human ignorance and lack of understanding, lack of faith, lack of belief. Earlier in John’s Gospel the author implied such meanings when the pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness, and in the very beginning of John’s Gospel the author wrote about light and darkness and how darkness did not prevail over the light. Darkness in today’s Gospel might also be symbolic of the sorrow, confusion, and grief Mary and the other disciples were feeling after Jesus’ death and burial. Maybe the darkness in today’s Gospel means all the above. In the darkness of despair, sorrow, confusion, fear, chaos, loss, in the early morning hours before sunrise Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been buried.

When she arrived, despite the darkness, she was able to see the stone that had been rolled over the opening of the tomb had been moved. The tomb was open. But she didn’t look inside. Not yet. This wasn’t what she had expected to see, and perhaps it felt like kick in the stomach or slap in the face after watching Jesus suffer an unjust trial, humiliating, excruciatingly painful and brutal death, and burial provided by the generosity of two of his secret followers. So, instead of investigating the open tomb, Mary ran away from it, and ran to her friends and fellow disciples share her discovery with them.

In so doing, Mary did one of the most natural things in the world. When faced with upsetting events she reached out to someone she could trust to help her figure it out, or just show it to them. It seems Peter and another disciple referred to in John’s Gospel as the Beloved Disciple believed her, because they took off running to the tomb. The author of John describes their race in detail, how they were neck and neck until the Beloved Disciple broke away and got to the tomb first. Did they know it was a race? Mary didn’t appear to because they seem to have left her behind. The Beloved Disciple got to the open tomb first but didn’t go in until Peter got there.

Maybe he waited because tombs in the time of Jesus were not very large or grand. The door or opening to the tomb was probably small, and located near the ground, so that you had to stoop down and crawl through to go into it. Once inside there was very little room to move around, and they wouldn't be able to stand up inside. All that was inside was a long, flat stone for the body, like was described in the Gospel. So, it was probably pretty crowded in there when Peter and the Beloved Disciple went inside.

Once inside the tomb Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw the linens that had been used to wrap Jesus' body laying undisturbed, as if the body had just disappeared. This means it was highly unlikely anyone stole Jesus' body. Although grave robbing was common enough to be a real concern at the time, no grave robber would first unwrap a dead body then lay the linen pieces back as if they were still wrapped around a body. After that all-important race to the tomb, the only thing Peter saw inside it was the linens laying there, no longer needed. The Beloved Disciple noticed the same linens and he believed. I am not sure what he believed, because the author doesn't say. Maybe he believed what Mary had said, the body was gone. Maybe he believed Jesus was raised; we aren't told.

After that revelation, both disciples went back to where they had come from. Without, it seems a word to Mary. We aren't told when she came back to the tomb, only that she was there after Peter and the Beloved Disciple left and that she was weeping. It's no wonder. She was the one who walked to the tomb in the dark hours of early morning, she discovered the tomb open, ran to get her friends who left her behind, and didn't bother to tell her what they saw. She lost the race to the tomb and had no idea what was going on. It was then that she bent down and didn't go into the tomb but looked inside and she saw something very different from what Peter and the Beloved Disciple had seen.

Mary didn't see empty linens. She saw angels. Two of them, one sitting on each side of the stone ledge where Jesus' body had been. We might wonder why the two disciples who had been in such a hurry to get the tomb didn't see those angels.

Oscar Romero might explain it by saying, "There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried." Perhaps what Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw was simply an empty tomb and empty linens. They did not seem to see Mary's suffering and sorrow, having left her behind in their competitive enthusiasm. But the angels saw her tears, that's why they asked her why she was weeping.

Often this question gets interpreted that Mary should have been shouting alleluias like we usually do on Easter Sunday, and the angels were chastising her for feeling the wrong emotion for the day. But I don't think that's the case. Mary's weeping was perhaps the result of a tumult of feelings: confusion, fear, sorrow, grief, and loss. After all, she answered the angels by saying her Lord had been taken away and she didn't know where he was. Perhaps the angels weren't trying to tell her to feel something different, maybe the angels asked the question to acknowledge her and her feelings. Maybe angels are sent to be with us when our friends can't, especially when we feel confused or frightened or are grieving.

As Mary turned from the angels, she was met by someone else who also acknowledged her and her feelings by asking her the same question, "why are you weeping". Again, she told of her pain of loss. Anyone who has suffered loss can understand Mary's pain that dark morning: the loss of a loved one, of a job, of hopes or dreams, of beloved tradition. Anyone who has suffered such loss might even admire Mary for her strength to face her pain, to stay in the place of pain, attempting to

work through it, instead of giving up and going back home. She was brave enough to face her pain, and she was the person in today's Gospel that the Risen Jesus called by name, and transformed that moment from sorrow to joy. That is when Mary saw her teacher and her lord. At that moment, even if the sun hadn't risen yet, there was light in Mary's eyes and heart. Sometimes, as Kate Moorehead writes, "we must move through our tears to find joy."

In this time of pandemic, when we are hearing so much confusing news about the covid-19 virus and new information comes out daily telling us of higher numbers of people infected with the virus and people dying from the virus, when we aren't permitted to meet together for worship or meetings, when we see people wearing masks in public, and people are losing jobs and businesses, Mary Magdalene is exactly the apostle and the saint we need this Easter Sunday. While many people like the disciples are racing each other to an empty tomb and empty linens only to go back home and attempt to normalize without seeing what was really there, Mary saw the risen Christ. She not only saw and believed, she encountered what today is all about: resurrection life. And it is Mary, the one who wept, that Jesus told to go and tell his disciples that he had risen, making her not only the first apostle, she was at that moment the Church on earth.

It is a common mistake to think Easter is the end of the story we began back on Palm Sunday. But the end of that story was on Friday, when Jesus died and was buried. That was the end. No one except God could do anything after that. Easter Sunday is the beginning of something new: it's God's new beginning in this world that God created and instead of wiping it out with a flood or fire and starting over from scratch, God is doing the amazing, slow, small, powerful work of redeeming this world and all of us.

Part of the awesomeness of resurrection is that it is born from humanity's pain. That is why it can be mistaken for an ending. But from loss and endings God makes new life, resurrection life that redeems, restores, forgives, heals.

The covid-19 pandemic has brought quite a few endings. And I hear a lot of fear that our world will forever be changed by these endings. Some say our churches won't be the same, others say it's the economy that will be forever changed, or schools, colleges and universities, others say it's the medical system or politics. That is why there are so many people racing to put everything from church services, to classes, to restaurant menus, to store catalogues, on line and we are told if we don't have zoom or some other video communication platform in place right away we will lose what congregation or customers or students or friends we had. They will wander to better produced live Facebook feeds. But isn't that just racing to an empty tomb? Isn't that neglecting to see resurrection life? Maybe there are some things that need to end, and we need to make space to grieve those losses. But maybe, just maybe, this is an opportunity to see more than what was and turn our tear-stained faces away from empty tombs and empty linens and toward resurrection life. Maybe we can emerge from this time that feels like an ending with renewed conviction to care for each other better, to value community more than we have, to see all people regardless of race, age, gender, color, socio-economic status, education, health or the mistakes or failures we made as equal beloved children of God? Maybe this is a chance to participate in the resurrection work of God and together make the world better than it is.

Today Mary Magdalen shows us that while we may see so much that makes us weep, it is through those eyes that have cried that we can also see the Risen Christ, go where he tells us and show the world resurrection life. Alleluia!