

Easter Sermon 2018

I'm so glad you are here today. Some of us are here because we show up most Sundays; some of us because if we had a church home, it would be this one; some of us got cajoled into coming; some of us were promised Easter candy. I'm glad you are, but I am pretty sure nobody ran to get here.

And I say that because there is a lot of running in our gospel today. In the last chapters of John, Jesus delivers long monologues to his followers, there is an extended trial with Pontius Pilate, there is a slow crucifixion scene. But by the time Sunday morning arrives, the pace picks up. People start running.

Well, it doesn't quite start that way. Mary Magdalene walks to the tomb, expecting to stand outside the entrance to the cave that held the body of Jesus. My mother-in-law's grave lies over at the Oswego Pioneer Cemetery on Stafford Road. I drive by that cemetery often, and occasionally I stop and have a talk with her. But I don't expect anything more than to read the grave marker that has her name on it and a portion of the Twenty-third Psalm in German: He makes me lie down in green pastures. That's what I expect, and that's what I find.

Same thing with Mary Magdalene: when she shows up at the tomb on the Sunday morning after Jesus had been crucified, she didn't expect anything more than to weep at his tomb. The gospel writer John says that Mary got there while it was still dark. In the other gospels, the women arrive at dawn, or they get there when it's already morning. Not in John's account. It's still dark. John loves to play with double meanings. In Mary Magdalene's world, everything is still dark. Her master is dead. The teacher who had removed seven demons from her is gone. She is simply here to pause at his grave. Her world is dark.

I have been with some of you this year when the world went dark. Your loved one died unexpectedly. The cancer came back. A relationship changed. We have seen the world grow dark in some ways. I only need to say the names: Las Vegas, Southerlin Springs, Parkdale. Family members have been caught up in addiction. We've known abuse and mental illness. Some of us are very familiar this year with the dark.

John the gospel writer says, Mary got there while it was still dark. But I love the fact that she gets there. I love the fact that she shows up at the grave. Mary had also been at the cross. In other words, she is a follower of Jesus who shows up. The other disciples are cowering somewhere. Mary shows up. That's a big part of life as disciples of Jesus, isn't it? Just keep showing up. Keep showing up in spite of your fears. Keep showing up when it's hard. Keep showing up when it would be easier to quit. Because as we keep showing up we trust that we will discover the workings of God.

Mary shows up, and sees something unexpected: the large stone that covered the entrance to the cave that held Jesus has been rolled away. She doesn't even look in; she just assumes someone snatched the body of her Lord and Master. So she runs (here we go with the running) back to Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, and says, "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb (more running); in fact, they have a foot race. The Beloved Disciple gets there first; he looks in the cave but doesn't go in. Peter arrives and looks in, sees the grave cloths all neatly folded, but no body is there. The Beloved Disciple looks in and sees the same thing- empty shelf, empty grave cloths, empty tomb- and he believes.

And we say, Wait a minute. He just sees an empty tomb and he believes? He hasn't even seen the resurrected Jesus; he hasn't seen angels; but he believes. You know, most of us haven't seen those things either. We haven't seen a vision of Jesus; we haven't experienced a spectacular miracle. But we find ourselves believing this story of God at work in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, maybe because we've seen it in our own lives. We know that's the way God works. God keeps taking dead ends and creating new life. We've seen it happen. The Beloved Disciple is like many of us. He looks...and believes.

The two men return home, but Mary stands there weeping. Resurrection, by the way, doesn't mean that we won't weep. It just means that our tears won't be the end of the story. She looks in the tomb again, and this time she sees two angelic figures, sitting on the shelf where Jesus' body should have been, one where his head should have been, and one where his feet should have been.

The angels are rather tight-lipped in this story. In the other accounts of the resurrection, angels have more to say. These two angels simply ask, Woman, why are you weeping? They know something she doesn't. She again says, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Even the sight of angels is not enough to enable her to believe.

She turns around and sees Jesus there, but she doesn't recognize him. He asks the same question: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Jesus asks a similar question at the beginning of the gospel, when two disciples of John the Baptist begin to follow him. Only there he says, "What are you looking for?"

Maybe that's a good question for some of us today. Whom are you looking for? Are you looking for a God who will remove all your troubles, cure all your ills, defeat all your enemies, a God who will calm all the storms of your life? God doesn't guarantee any of that. What we do know from Good Friday and Easter is that God works through death and resurrection.

At the heart of our faith is a God who dies on a cross; a God who refuses to blow away the opposition, but who conquers with sacrificial love. I would suggest you not base your faith on the miracles of Jesus, or on God's ability to cure all our problems. Our faith is based on the promise that out of the wounded side of Jesus, new life will flourish; out of the suffering of our lives, God will create good.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this: "Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the broken pieces and make something holy out of them- not from a distance, but right close up."

God picks up the broken pieces on that first Easter. Jesus had said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That's a gardening image. Notice that John the gospel writer describes the tomb being in a garden. He's the only gospel writer who does that. It's as if John is taking us back to the Garden of Eden, back to creation, and saying, God is creating all over again! God is bringing about a new world in the resurrection of Jesus!

But back to the story. Thinking Jesus is the gardener, Mary says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And Jesus finally calls her by name: “Mary.” When does she finally recognize him? When he calls her by name. Earlier Jesus had said, My sheep hear my voice, and I call them by name.

Mary calls out to him, Rabbouni, which means teacher. She is a follower who wants to be in relationship again. Mary is the example for all of us who want to follow Jesus. He offers us a relationship with him. He describes himself as the way, the truth, the life. He has sheep who don’t even know they are following him. But they are walking in his way.

Mary apparently falls at his feet and wraps her arms around him, because he says, “Do not hold onto me.” The Greek literally means, Do not keep holding onto me. Do not cling to me. Jesus says, Don’t cling to that old relationship we had before today. We need to have a new relationship now that I am resurrected. I need to go to the Father, but you will remain here. I will dwell in you as you dwell in me.

But Jesus does tell her, “Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” I am opening up my relationship with God to you.

And Mary becomes the first witness to the resurrection. She runs back to the disciples and says, “I have seen the Lord.” And she tells them everything he had said to her. By the way, I don’t claim to understand the resurrection of Jesus. Nobody saw it happen. But these followers of Jesus experienced his presence after he died, and they told others about it, and it was enough to convince people to give up their lives for this story of death and resurrection.

And if you were making up a story in first century Palestine, you wouldn’t have women as the witnesses who told of their experience. Women couldn’t testify in a court of law. They couldn’t be trusted. So if you were making this up, you’d have some respectable men tell the story. But what we are asked to do is to believe the women. That sounds pretty current, doesn’t it?

Let me close by asking, What does resurrection look like? What does hope look like? Will Willimon was once the chaplain at the Duke University Chapel. One of

the students who came to chapel was in the Duke Law School and became an assistant prosecuting attorney. This attorney said to Willimon one day, I like being a lawyer because I get to tell the truth. And Willimon said, What do you mean? Give me an example. He said, Well, the law is about getting to the truth. And as a Christian, I'm able to share the truth that we know when I get an opportunity.

He said, "Recently I was part of a plea deal that sent a young man to prison for ten years. And when we were finished, I asked if we could have a couple of minutes alone. The prosecutor left, and this seventeen-year-old burst into tears at the prospect of prison. I took him by the hand, and I said, Listen to me. I know the truth about your life. I've got some good news for you. This is not over. God's got plans for you. If God can raise the dead, God can redeem this. That's the truth."

And let me tell you this this morning. Not only is this good news for new beginnings in this life, for new possibilities, for start-overs, but it's good news for the life to come. The Apostle Paul says in a letter to the Corinthian Christians, "Even so as in Adam all die, even so all will be made alive in Christ." (I Corinthians 15:22) All will be made alive, Paul says. Even people who don't believe? Paul says all. Jesus says in John's Gospel, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth on the cross, will bring all people to myself." (John 12:32) I have come to believe that in the cross and empty tomb, God in Christ reaches out to save the whole world.

A pastor once was visiting a member in the hospital. It was Maundy Thursday, four days before Easter. This husband and wife had been married for thirty years. The husband was critically ill, and he passed away that night.

The funeral was arranged for the next Monday, the day after Easter. When that day came, the hearse pulled up to the church, and the pastor watched as the widow stepped out of the vehicle. He couldn't help but notice that she was wearing a red hat and a red dress. The pastor had a look of surprise on his face. The woman said, You know, pastor, I had a black dress picked out, and that would have been fine. But then I put the red one on, because I thought, What if Mary Magdalene was right?

Would you pray with me? God, we are here this morning, and we are a mixture of faith and doubt, of hopes and fears, of following you and holding back. The good

news is that you love us the way we are, and that we have been gathered into Christ's embrace in the cross and resurrection. We thank you that the risen Christ walks with us into the future, whatever it brings. We pray in his name. Amen.