



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter Day (C)

Hope in Despair

**[RCL] Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 or Acts 10:34-43;
John 20:1-18 or Luke 24:1-12**

Darkness still hides the coming dawn as Mary Magdalene ventures out to Jesus' tomb. What she sees shakes this fearless follower of Jesus to her marrow. She discovers that the massive stone set in place to seal his tomb has been removed. Mary has no thoughts of resurrection. An empty tomb is frightening when you don't know what happened to the body of the deceased.

The Gospel of John picks up the story here from the afternoon of Jesus' crucifixion. We have moved beyond the brutal scene Magdalene witnessed on Friday as Jesus was tortured and died on the cross. Silence follows the sure and certain knowledge that the long hoped-for Messiah has been executed. Jesus' death plunged those who loved him into the dark night of hopelessness. John uses this imagery of light and darkness as he wrote of Jesus, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." John sets the enlightenment that comes through faith in Jesus in opposition to the lack of hope of a world turned from God, which he likens to a world with no source of light. Jesus told his followers, "I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."

Jesus' followers are enveloped in grief and fear with no hope that light will return. Their grief was an immense ocean of loss. They had lost not just a friend or teacher, but their desire to see good conquer evil and love defeat hate. The loss of the light of Christ here can be compared to extinguishing all the lights when you are in a cave. Deep underground, where not even the faintest glimmer exists, the darkness is palpable, weighty. This is something John wants to convey about the longest sabbath of his life as Jesus lay entombed near the site of his death.

Jesus of Nazareth was a real man, well attested to historically, who gathered an impressive following before being put to death as a threat to the status quo by a Roman provincial governor. There had been and would be many more would-be Messiahs. That the Jesus Movement persisted centuries after his death is what is so highly unusual. The continued existence of faith in Jesus points us back to what occurred that Sunday morning in the garden tomb in Jerusalem that transformed human history by igniting a new hope in those lost in grief.

We read in the Gospel that Mary Magdalene was so bewildered by the empty tomb that she went for help and soon Simon Peter and John were literally racing to the tomb. John arrived first to see the linen wrappings without pushing into the tomb itself. Peter goes inside and discovers the linen wrappings, with the head cloth rolled up and set in a place by itself. John's Gospel shows how the light of the glory of what God had done in raising Jesus was slow to dawn on his followers. This lack of recognition reveals the way despair clouds our vision and hinders us from seeing rightly. It takes time for the eyes of their hearts to adjust to this new light. Peter and John return home. Only Mary Magdalene remains. She stands weeping outside the tomb. Jesus says, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

She still cannot grasp the world-changing revelation of Jesus' resurrection even though he is standing in front of her. Hearing her name called by Jesus, the light of the glory of God floods in. Mary Magdalene becomes the Apostle to the Apostles, bringing the Good News that life has conquered death. She went out into the darkness of the night to return illumined by the risen Jesus.

Notice that the anguish the disciples endured was warranted. We find that despair is the natural reaction to seeing the fallen world as it is. We see all the effects of our sin and disobedience to God's will. We see the painful divisions that we humans have collectively created. Despair is what arises in our spirits when we look realistically at this situation but do so without hope in a God who acts in human history. Hope sees the world from the godly perspective, knowing that all we see is not all that there is.

We see this shift in perspective as first Mary Magdalene and then the rest of Jesus' followers will come to experience Jesus anew after his resurrection. Then after the coming of the Holy Spirit fifty days later at Pentecost, they would be astounded to see how people who never knew Jesus when he was alive, came to experience him as they did. And for us as well, the real proof of the resurrection comes not just in a story of something that happened long ago, but also in our own experience of God's presence. This is something way more reliable than your feelings. For you should know that you will not always feel Christ in and with you, yet in looking back over difficult times, we can see how God was with us. You can know if the peace was beyond you or if the healing or the sense of release with forgiveness comes from God.

We see in Jesus' crucifixion, how far the love of God extends, to never give up on that love, even when it means death on a cross. God, the Holy Trinity, who made us out of love for love did not stand back like a disinterested clockmaker. Our transcendent God entered into this broken world in the person of Jesus, to redeem us through his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. In the resurrection, we discover how good defeats evil and love conquers hate.

Look at your own life and the times you thought you could barely lift your head and go on. Then there was a little resurrection as hope was restored. Sometimes, even this lesser resurrection is quite profound as a person claws their way back to the light from the deep darkness of an opioid addiction in a series of fits and starts, rehab and relapse, to finally wake from the nightmare and live day by day empowered by the same Holy Spirit who transformed the disciples, who followed Jesus, into Apostles, who took the faith to

the ends of the earth. When that person tells you that the healing could never have come without God, believe them. Signs of resurrection abound.

Easter is a moveable feast in that we can share the joy of the resurrection—light dispelling the darkness—at any time and in every place where we find someone hurting and in need of kindness. You can shine a lamp into the depths when you have co-workers, friends, and family who will experience the feeling of abandonment whether in the midst of cancer treatment, the death of a marriage, or by being downsized out of a job. Simply showing up to be with someone in such a time of sorrow or distress can be like striking a match in an abyss. The Holy Spirit can and will use your faithfulness to restore their trust and confidence as well as yours.

While a realistic look at the world gives rise to despondency, when we know that God can, does, and will show up, we are reassured that light still shines in the darkness and the darkness can never overcome it. Whatever may come, you are known and loved by the God who holds eternity and who is also Emmanuel, the God with you in every storm of life. Knowing the power and presence of God is the spark that makes turning from despair to hope not only possible but also reasonable and right. For greater is the one who is in us even in our darkest moments than the one in our despairing world.

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