

Easter Sunday

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If there was ever a day to celebrate this is the day, if there was ever a day to swagger around like a champion this is the day, like when the football players score a touchdown and do their little victory dance, or when the basketball team makes it to the next round of the tournament and everyone is jumping around, pumping their fists in the air. This is the day. Yes Lord Jesus, you have triumphed, and we all win!

Christ is risen...he is risen indeed!

Paul says let anyone who boasts, boast in the Lord! And this is a day to boast in the Lord. Because we know that through Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, he has delivered us from sin, death, and the devil, and Jesus has opened for us, the gate to everlasting life.

So we shout out loud so all the world can hear, Christ is risen! ... he is risen indeed!

But we all know that's not how our story begins for today. In fact, as our gospel reading begins, it begins in darkness. It begins with one solitary figure walking through the darkness. Mary Magdalene has broken through her fear and gotten up early in order to tend to the body of her teacher and friend, to tend to the work that death has done.

In this season of COVID-19, a time of pandemic and quarantine, we are greeted daily by the reality of the work death has done. How many new lives has death taken today? What is the new total of deaths due to the coronavirus? Has anyone notable died? Has any personal friend of ours died?

Checking in on the work of death Is something we are painfully reminded of each day, and it was the first thing Mary Magdalene had to do on that first Easter Sunday morning. Someone who was a personal friend to her had fallen victim to death, and living in that darkness, Mary, is the first to go to Jesus' tomb.

When Mary finds that the stone has been removed from the tomb, immediately she assumes that something bad has happened. Someone has stolen our Lord's body! And she runs to tell Peter and the disciples what has happened. Did she really know that the body of Jesus wasn't there? How could she assume that something more was wrong? How often do we jump to conclusions about God's action in our lives?

Mary was living in darkness.

And we've all been there too, in the midst of our troubles and challenges, we often expect more trouble to follow. We may see the world through the lens of hopelessness and despair. We too, may see only darkness, when there is plenty of light all around.

After hearing from Mary, Peter and another disciple run to the tomb and discover that the tomb is empty indeed. Scripture tells us that the other disciple "saw and believed", but what did he or she believe? Did they believe that the body was stolen, or that Jesus had "conquered the world"? As the two head home there are no shouts of joy, no celebration. The emptiness of the tomb doesn't seem to have made a difference.

So the focus of the story returns to Mary who is standing outside the tomb, weeping. This time, Mary does enter the tomb, but when she looks in, she does not find an empty tomb. Two angels are there to greet her. Now the angels knew the magnitude of what has taken place and so they ask Mary, "Why are you weeping?"

In Luke's telling of the story the angels also say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" But Mary can't comprehend what's going on around her, she's looking for a dead body, so she turns away from this incredible, supernatural encounter, and sees a man in the garden and asks him where they've taken Jesus' body.

Mary assumes the man to be a gardener, and how fitting, for gardeners are all about raising new life, nurturing new life, caring for the growth of what has been put in their care.

And this presumed gardener then turns to Mary...and it is Jesus, who calls her name. And when Mary hears her name, the darkness disappears and she is able to see Jesus. Now Mary knows that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead!

Mary cries out, "Teacher!" and rushes to embrace Jesus. Now we can infer that they did embrace, because the next thing Jesus says to her is "Do not hold on to me." Jesus will soon be ascending to the Father, but clinging to or holding onto him could impede his going forth. Mary cannot hold onto him, because he has somewhere else to be, and when he finishes speaking to her, so does she.

Jesus sends her to his followers and she becomes the apostle to the apostles. The first witness to the risen Christ, as she triumphantly proclaims, "I have seen the Lord!" and immediately her life is changed forever.

I'll never forget one day when I was commuting to work in Kansas City, I was traveling along this road next to some hills that had these large limestone outcroppings, and as I came around the curve, I had to stomp on the brakes because there in front of me was a huge mass of the limestone cliffs that had broken away from the side of the hill, it was as big as a house and much of the hill had come down with it too. The road was completely blocked. It was truly an awesome sight, because you could feel the power

of the force that moved that mountain. I had no choice but to find another way to get to my destination.

And that's like what Jesus' death and resurrection does to our lives. No longer can we travel along the same road that we've been traveling, we are forced to stop, and reflect on where we are going. We stop, because our lives have been changed, transformed, and when we listen to God's call in our lives there's no turning back to the past, there's only a new dawn, a new day, a new path to follow, with our risen Christ leading the way.

Even for the disciples, like Mary, Easter does not return her and Jesus to the past; Easter opens up a new future. Jesus' earthly ministry is now over, and the ministry of the church, the exalted, glorified body of Christ begins. Jesus will say, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you." "In fact," Jesus says, "the one who believes, will even do greater works than I did."

So, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene in the garden, "Do not hold onto me, but go and announce to my brothers and sisters my resurrection and ascension to the presence of God. The Holy Spirit will come to lead, comfort, and empower the church.

The resurrection is not a return to the past, but a movement to the future. Neither Mary, nor any of us, nor our congregation can hold on to the past after the resurrection. We look to the even greater future that God has in store for us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

To Mary, he says, "Go and tell." To us he might say, "Help and heal." Or "Fix and forgive" or "Restore and reconcile." There are a multitude of missions to be carried out in the name of Jesus, and the challenge for us today, as it was for Mary and Peter and John on that very first Easter, it to listen to what Jesus is challenging us to do.

Maybe Jesus is calling you to offer some help to the frail and faltering widow who lives alone down the street, or to reach out with healing and hope to a misunderstood teenager who feels angry and isolated.

Perhaps Christ is calling you to fix a friendship that has been broken by a thoughtless act on your part, or to forgive a relative who hurt you very deeply.

Maybe the Lord is calling you to build or restore a house for a low-income member of the community, or to work on issues of justice in our community.

Perhaps Christ is calling you to spread the word of God, teach our children, or glorify him in worship, in music, in praise.

Only you know what Jesus is calling you to go and do with the resurrection life that he has given you.

And when we do what God has called us to do, we proclaim the risen Christ with our lives. In our words and deeds we tell the world that hope is alive in the risen Christ. Alleluia! Alleluia. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!