

The Other Side of the Cross©

John 20:1-18

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The choir sang *Was it a Morning Like This?* Was it? Was it April 1st the Sunday after Jesus died? Did Mary and Peter and the other disciples expect to hear “He is risen. April fools! Well of course not, but don’t you imagine they were somehow expecting it to end up being some terrible, not funny joke? Something perhaps the Romans did to trick them.

Yes, they had seen Jesus raise a dead man from death to life, but they had seen Jesus, the only one whom they knew could do that kind of miracle, die. He was gone. He was dead. Really seriously horribly dead.

They had seen it for themselves as they helped wrap him up in the linens and watched as he was placed in the tomb. Watched as the huge stone was rolled into place to seal the tomb – a stone that was very difficult to remove after it slid into those grooves.

But here was Mary, walking quietly through the garden before it was even light. Maybe the sun was just trying to create a faint light in the eastern sky. She was courageous to slip into that garden alone. She was brave to go to the tomb of the one who was just crucified as a criminal – a rebel.

Yet she went. We all know what it feels like to grieve the loss of someone we love so much. Especially right afterwards. It so painful, so raw, you just feel like you may never get back to feeling normal, to feeling like you did before death robbed you of your loved one.

There was something I shared on Facebook the other day about grief. Some of you may have seen it. It’s written by Jamie Anderson from lessonslearnedinlife.com.

“Grief, I’ve learned, is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Greif is just love with no place to go.”

Mary was in grief. She had so much love for Jesus with no place to go with it. She couldn’t see him or talk to him anymore. The only place she knew to go was to the tomb where she last saw him.

We do that, don’t we? We go stand at the grave of our loved one, sometimes we talk to them. One time I was out for a walk, when we lived in Minnesota. The beautiful old cemetery was just a block away from home and I loved to go there and walk.

One day, I was walking and I heard a noise. It was a young woman sobbing, wailing out loud as she leaned against the headstone of someone. I left her alone in her grief. I wasn’t sure what to do but I knew if it were me, I would want to be left alone.

I wonder if Mary’s weeping was like that on that morning. Her heart breaking. She came to the tomb and was shocked to see the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. She thought either someone had stolen the body of Jesus or the soldiers had moved him just to torment Jesus’ friends even more.

She ran back to tell the others, and Peter and another disciple (John likes to say the ‘one Jesus loved – probably meaning himself, made a bee line for the tomb to see for themselves. The other disciple arrived first but he couldn’t bring himself to go in right away.

Oh, but Peter did. Peter got in far enough to see that not only was Jesus’ body gone, but the linens that had been wrapped around him were lying neatly where he had laid. And the cloth that had been over his face was rolled up and placed at the other end by itself.

That’s kind of odd, isn’t it? If someone were stealing the body – or moving the body, surely they wouldn’t take the time to unwrap him and neatly roll the grave clothes.

John says Peter and the other disciple believed. What they believed is a little unclear. Certainly, they believed the Lord was not in that tomb. And they both raced off to go tell the others, leaving poor Mary there alone again.

She stood outside the tomb weeping – probably like that young woman I saw in the cemetery. Finally, she looked one more time in the tomb and this time, instead of seeing the linens on each end, she saw two angels in white – one on each end of the place where Jesus had laid.

They asked her why she was crying, and she answered that someone had taken Jesus and she didn’t know where he was. Then she turned around and saw a man whom she thought was the gardener. He too asked her why she was crying and who she was looking for.

Before she could hardly get out the answer, he called her by name. Mary!

Until now, she did not know it was Jesus. But when the Lord calls your name, you know. She suddenly recognized him as the Lord and she went to hold onto him, but he told her not to yet, but to go and tell the others.

She was elated as she ran back to tell them, “I have seen the Lord!”

What a difference there was from just a few minutes before. From mourning to joy. From weeping to elation.

We know this story really well. We who have come to church for so long know this Easter story. Even if we only come to church at Christmas and on Easter Sunday, we know these stories. Each gospel writer tells it a little different. But the basic message is that Christ was risen from the dead.

But do we know what it means to be here, on the other side of the cross? Do we have a real clear understanding of what difference it makes? Do we know what Jesus did, the impact of his death and rising? Do we feel the power of what that means in our lives and in the world?

During the baptism, we said together the Apostles’ Creed. It is a very old statement of faith that people who are believers have said for years and years. We say ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, who was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell...’

Wait, what? Hell? Jesus went to hell? Is that true? And Why?

Listen to what Peter writes in his first letter, in chapter 3:

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he

went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.” - 1 Peter 3:18-20

And he also writes then, in chapter 4:

For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does. - 1 Peter 4:6

And Paul writes to the Ephesians in chapter 4:

*“Therefore it is said,
‘When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.’
(When it says, ‘He ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)” - Ephesians 4:8-10*

The amazing thing is that Jesus took on the sins of the world, the sins of those in his day and in future generations which includes us, but, according to Scripture, Jesus also went and preached the good news of salvation to those who had been captive in death for a very long time. Hope was not lost on those who had sinned and died years before Jesus even came to earth.

Now, you might say, ‘well, I don’t really believe in hell.’ But you believe in death, right? You believe in the grave. You’ve seen it. You’ve suffered grief because of it. You’ve felt that pain of love with no place to go.

I’m telling you, if death and the grave is a place where God is not – forever and ever – then that alone is most certainly a hell. Right?

Listen, Paul says in Philippians 2 that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Prince of Heaven, gave up his equality with God to become a human, to humble himself as a slave. He gave up everything to give his life for you and for me so that death has no lasting sting. He opened up the gates of hell and took those keys once and for all back to the Father, back where they belong.

I envision the great reunion as the risen Lord, who had just conquered death and hell, coming to the gates of heaven and bursting through with angels singing and praising Jesus. At Advent we sing, “Lift up your heads, you mighty gates, that the King of glory might come in.”

And in he comes, exalted and glorious and victorious. He has set the captives free! He has redeemed a world that was dying in sin.

And that, my Easter friends, is very good news. It is great news! It is the reason that we can say, with confidence when we are burying a loved one, those words in the liturgy:

‘All of us go down to the dust, but even at the grave we make our song ... Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!’

Yes, we still have sorrows, yes, we still have sickness and pain and grief. But friends, because Jesus lives, we too shall live. Those are all temporary things. He has broken those chains that keep us bound up. We are free, we are forgiven, we are given new and everlasting life. When we die, it's not the end. Jesus rose, and so shall we. Our spirits will dwell with him in eternity.

Someday, he will return again as he promised, and will finally establish the perfect Kingdom. John writes in Revelation:

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”*

“And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also, he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” - Revelation 21:3-5

And we say, *“He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father, almighty.*

“I believe in the communion of the saints (fellowship with those who have gone before us), the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

We are on the other side of the cross. We can make that statement of faith because of what Jesus Christ did for us.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

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