

Holy Hope

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, MN

Easter Sunday - April 9 2023

Texts: Colossians 3:1-4

SCRIPTURE READING Colossians 3:1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

GOSPEL READING John 20:1-18



Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by

itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Is any church celebration quite as strange and mysterious as Easter? Of course Christmas is exquisite, touching, a light in the dark of winter. But if the birth of Jesus is a miracle, well, isn't every birth a miracle in its own way? Birth happened to all of us. Mostly it's a joyful occasion. Death will happen to all of us, too. Mostly it's sad and sometimes tragic.



But resurrection? In bodily form? But Jesus wasn't instantly recognizable, at least to Mary. He was changed, transformed. Most tales about people returning from the dead are kind of horrid: Ghouls and ghosties, zombies, Frankenstein. If I were Mary, I wouldn't have expected to meet a recently dead and buried person walking around, either. What if Jesus had called my name? Would I have stayed? Or would I have run away?

The whole thing is beyond belief, a holy mystery. Maybe that's why different cultures display such a glorious spectrum of traditions. Where I lived on the island of Crete, Christmas was a dud, but Easter was amazing. Easter was holy hilarity. For one thing: the priest. Orthodox priests were always married, usually wealthy, and revered for their virility, with lots of children. Ours was handsome, imposing, with electric blue eyes. He frequently disappeared behind the altar screen to comb his hair. Services during Holy Week ran from nine until midnight, while the priest droned on, elders dozed standing up (there were only a few chairs, all deeply uncomfortable), and children ran around hitting people with broken candles until they too fell asleep.



On Good Friday, though, the mood changed. The women got up early and stripped the village of its profusion of flowers: roses, carnations, geraniums, calla lilies. At the church, men brought out a small wooden table with a canopy: Jesus' tomb. We covered that table with flowers. Not an inch of wood showed (the one in the picture has more carving, but not so many flowers). An icon of Jesus was placed on a bed of rose petals, and carried around outside the church. A couple of men held it high and the villagers—all 60 or so—walked underneath with lots of laughter and jostling: Jesus' death be on us! Hurray! Then we gathered dry sticks and straw, the better to burn, stuffed a suit of clothes with them and hung Judas high.



Easter morning, back we went to church. "Light your candle from the priest's candle," we were told. "He's got the *good fire!*" with broad winks that assured us the sexual innuendo was *not* accidental. Poor hanged Judas was burned, too, blazing merrily for his sins. Then we trooped home, shielding our candle flames, to light a new fire to burn throughout the whole year. "If it goes out, you will die," the children told us seriously. And we cracked colored eggs, ate roast lamb and sweet Easter bread, and got mildly inebriated on the local wine and spirits. All in all, a celebration of life. Irresistible, and full of hope.

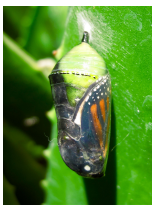


And yet, Easter would not, could not, exist without Good Friday. Resurrection is not really resurrection unless it follows real death. That's the truth, no matter how we cover it with flowers and bunnies and bonnets. And death is hard. After my mother's death, I would sometimes dream about her, whole and healthy, not emaciated from cancer and chemo. She would walk toward me with her arms wide, smiling. "But I thought you were dead!" I would gasp. And then before I could hug her, I would awaken, and the wound of losing her would bleed as though it had never begun to heal. The death of a loved one *is* a wound. That morning the disciples were grievously wounded. Maybe they wished for death themselves. They had betrayed and failed their Master in life, and now he was dead, gone forever, and they were confused and helpless.



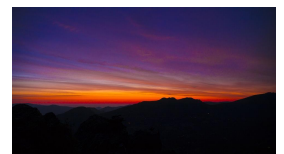
That's where Mary was when the gardener spoke to her on Easter morning, in that first wild sea of grief, unable to believe her teacher was really gone, but equally unable to rid herself of the image of his lifeless body being taken down from the cross and laid in the stone-cold tomb. Until he says her name. "Mary." And this tender intimacy catches her torn between sobs and joy. "Teacher," she answers. As for Jesus, he's like raw electricity, untamed and dangerous to touch.

And some of that fire enters Mary, and she, too, is transformed. "Unless a seed dies and is buried," Jesus taught them, "it remains just a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." The husk has to break for new life to begin. Jesus *is* the gardener, bringing life from the brokenness within her. Giving her the strength to go and tell the others what she had seen and heard and felt. Was she glowing, too, I wonder? The church recognizes her as the first apostle, apostle to the apostles.



Resurrection is not bouncing back into the same old life, it's emerging into new life, as a transformed being. Eternal life doesn't mean life that's long; it means life that's infinitely deep and dense and available right now. It means life with infinite life in it, life that can't be taken from us—not by what happens to us, not by our own errors, not even by death. Easter is God's victory over our sin, over our judgment of others, over our own brokenness and the brokenness of a violent and unjust world. It's love's victory over death and over our fear of it. "You have been raised with Christ, so seek the things that are holy, where Christ is, which is now everywhere, the life surging in all living things. Set your minds on what is holy, not on things that pass away, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

Easter says to us, Listen. Christ is alive: your teacher, your healer, your forgiveness, your savior, your comforter, your new best friend. Day is breaking, light is dawning. He is risen. He is calling your name, calling you to a new life, to a holy hope of eternity now, shining for you, shining within you. He is in you, and you in him. So come out of the tomb you've dug for yourself, and greet the new day. Christ lives! He is risen indeed. Alleluia.



Prayers

Holy One, on this holiest of days, awaken us to the new life you have promised us, the true life that springs from death. May we see you in the kindness of strangers, the blossoming of spring, the infinity of the sky, the dawn of a new day.

We remember that these days are holy also to our Muslim and Jewish neighbors; may we extend our blessing to them and to all who seek and find you in their own way. We deplore the violence that pits people of one faith against one another. Teach your children to be peacemakers.

Even as we rejoice in the life that permeates the universe, we see that too many still suffer and die tragically and needlessly. Give us heart and hope to advocate for equity among peoples, and among nations. Teach us to greet one another with a holy kiss and a mind open to understanding.

We hold in your Light those who are especially loved and all who mourn. May they be transformed by your goodness.

God of resurrection, Mary went to the garden looking for you. Two thousand years later, we follow in her footsteps. We seek after you, hungry to hear you say our name. So hold all of our prayers in your hearts, and continue to reveal yourself in this broken world. Until God's promised day, we will sing, "Alleluia!" We will hold onto hope. We will seek you all of our days,

And we will pray the words your Son taught us to pray, saying,
Our Mother and Father in heaven, holy be your name.
Impose your reign that we may do your will, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today this one day's bread.
Forgive our wrongs as we forgive those who do wrong against us.
Save us from our temptations and keep us from doing evil,
For the Realm, the power, and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.