

Easter Sunday: Holy Trinity Church: April 4, 2021

John 20: 1-18: *He is not here! He is Risen!*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Sons and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

My sisters and brothers in Christ. Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. It's so good to see all your smiling faces this Easter morning as we celebrate the greatest event in human history, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb! I hope you came here this morning ready to celebrate.

Ironically, on that first Easter Sunday morning, the women came to Jesus' tomb expecting to do nothing like celebrating, at all. They expected nothing but death and grief and painful memories. The surprise they experienced that morning changed their lives, and the course of human history.

What would you do if you came to a tomb and the dead person stepped out to greet you? I don't know about you, but my first reaction would be panic.

That's not unreasonable. We know how to prepare for death. We know how

to respond to it. But how do you prepare for the Resurrection? How do you prepare to meet the risen Lord?

The time was Sunday morning just before dawn. The setting, a garden not too far from the place where Jesus had been cruelly crucified. In the garden was a tomb, freshly hewn from rock. A giant stone that once sealed the sepulcher had been rolled aside. Some grief-stricken women made their way to that lonely spot. Of these women, John's Gospel identifies only Mary Magdalene. Among the names included in the other Gospels are Mary, the mother of James, Joanna and Salome. Undoubtedly the silence of the night and the solemnness of the occasion caused them to move quietly toward the place where their Lord's body had been laid. They brought spices with which to anoint him. It must have been frightening, to discover the stone already rolled away from the tomb and the tomb empty. He was not there. What did it mean? Had his final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Did his enemies fear and despise him so much that they had seized his broken body?

The women quickly scattered to tell their families and friends of this disturbing event. Mary rushed to inform Peter and John. They hurried back to the tomb with her, but they were as mystified as she was. They returned to the safety and seclusion of their homes. Mary was alone now with her grief.

She stood weeping quietly just outside the door of the tomb. In vain desperation she stooped and allowed herself one last look inside the burial vault. Imagine her dismay when she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” As she said this, she was suddenly conscious of a man standing near her. He said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Mary supposed that he was the gardener. She said with deep anguish in her voice, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, that I may reclaim his body.” As she said this, the stranger softly called her name, “Mary.” Whether the sun was just beginning to peep sleepily over some nearby Judean hillside at this precise moment we do not know. Tear swollen eyes combined with pre-dawn darkness would explain Mary’s failure to recognize Jesus immediately. Undoubtedly, however, when he called her name, there was a sunrise in Mary’s heart. “Rabboni!” she answered in Hebrew, which means “teacher.” Doesn’t that give you goose bumps. That just gives me goose bumps. With a sudden surge of emotion, she sought to embrace him. It was the natural response of deep and grateful love. You know, I truly believe Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married. Many would say that statement was heresy. I do not. Mary Magdalene was not a

prostitute. Mary Magdalene, women and children followed their husbands and supported their ministry. What was not a matter of speculation, however, was Mary's devotion to this humble rabbi. Impulsively she reached for him, but Jesus stopped her with the explanation that he had not yet ascended to the Father. Mary Magdalene will have to be content to hold him in her heart. That is exactly what she did. Later she would testify to his disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

So, my sisters and brothers in Christ, what does Mary Magdalene's experience on that first Easter Sunday have to do with your life and mine? On this Easter Morning, I ask you a question, are there empty tombs in your life into which you may be peering in the tomb with a sense of helplessness and despair? That would not be surprising. This Easter morning you may be peering into a tomb by the loss of a loved one, your mother, your father, your child, your sibling, your wife, your husband or other causes. My brothers and sisters. for grief is a universal experience. And so, it is a relevant question: is there a sense in which each of us can also come through a crisis of doubt and uncertainty and be able to proclaim victoriously, "I have seen the Lord."

We should note, first, the sense of hopelessness that enshrouded all those who followed Jesus after his crucifixion. If actions speak louder than words, those

first disciples made it abundantly clear that they no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world. Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship for us. We cannot appreciate the Easter message, however, if we cannot understand that the first Easter was born in total darkness. Perhaps you have been there. Maybe you have lived for a while behind a closed door. Many good people have. Grief, fear, hopelessness causes us to retreat. We don't want to face the world.

The two nights following Jesus' crucifixion were the longest nights that those who loved him would ever endure. Perhaps you have gone through your own long dark night of the soul. Your grief washes over you like a wave in the surf when the words of a doctor say, "I am sorry, it's stage 4 pancreatic cancer. There is nothing we can do." A phone call in the night from the police, "Mrs. Jones, there has been an accident. Could you come to the hospital?" A parent to a young child: "You know, dear, Mommy and Daddy have not been getting along lately. We have decided to try living apart for a while." Many of you have had your own dark night of the soul. Easter was not born in the brightness of the day. It was the women who came to the tomb while it was still dark.

But listen, brothers and sisters. We need to know that help is closer than we think. The darkness of the moment and our tear swollen eyes may blind us to a friend who is standing quietly in the shadows nearby. Softly, he asks, “Woman, why are you weeping? Why are you in such despair?” After listening to our complaint, he whispers your name. And we recognize that he has been there all the time. He is not dead, he is alive! Christ is alive and because he is alive, we discover that the sun rises again, and the birds sing, and joy begins to creep back into our life.

In his short political career, Congressman Leo Ryan dedicated himself to issues of social justice and compassion for those who didn’t have a voice in society. Sadly, he was assassinated in 1978 while trying to reach out to members of Jim Jones’ Jonestown cult in Guyana. Ryan had gone there to ensure that Jones’ followers weren’t being brainwashed or threatened or held against their will in this isolated compound. As one of his closest friends said of him, “He would march into the heart of hell to see it firsthand.” I know someone else who was willing to march into hell to rescue those he came to save, one who was willing to give up his own power and divinity to walk in our shoes, one who gave up his life on the cross to save us from the power of death. Easter reminds us that Jesus came to save us. Help and hope are closer than we think.

My sisters and brothers hope springs eternal. And it does! Hope is another way in which God whispers our name. If you believe that there is an answer, an answer will be found. I cannot recall any appearance of the risen Christ to an unbeliever. Your greatest ally in the long, dark nights of the soul is your faith and your hope. “I am here, I am risen” Jesus says, “I will never forsake you.”

My sisters and brothers, this brings us to the final thing we need to say on this Easter Sunday morning. The victory of Easter is a gift available to anyone who will receive it. The New Testament was not written by Greeks who believed in the immortality of the soul. It was written by Jews who believed that when a person dies, he or she really dies. But because of their experience with the risen Christ, these first Christians knew that a gracious, loving God grants life, eternal life, to all who will receive it. As Christ was resurrected from the grave, so may you and I experience new life through him. That is the gift he longs to give each of us. It is the opportunity to experience victorious living here and now.

Comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert was just 10 years old when his father and two teenage brothers died in tragic plane crash. Colbert credits his mother’s faith and resilience with helping him cope with his grief. He says his

mother's example of coping with her own grief kept him from giving in to bitterness. But for many years, Colbert turned his back on his faith. After graduating college, he considered himself an atheist. But one day, while walking down the street in Chicago a stranger handed Colbert a small book containing the New Testament and Psalms. Inside the front cover was a list of verses to read if you needed help. Colbert flipped to the verses on anxiety. And as he read these verses, he says, ". . . for the first time, I understood the real meaning of the phrase, 'It spoke to me.'" He stood on that street corner in the cold and read the words contained in that book, and, he says, "My life has never been the same."

My brothers and sisters in the Risen Christ, the most remarkable story in all of history is the change that took place in the lives of those early Christians after their encounter with the Risen Christ. They became fearless and unstoppable. And why not? Those early disciples knew that Christ had conquered death. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of confidence in the power and purpose of God? You can, you know. It is God's gift to all who will receive it. Are you peering anxiously into an empty tomb this morning? Don't give up. There is a Friend closer than you think. He is calling your name. Jesus is offering you a gift. It is the gift of an abundant life and eternal life.

**Say Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed. SAY AMEN! Say
AMEN!**