

Be Ready for the Possibility of the Resurrection

John 20:1-18

The last couple of days have been extremely difficult for the followers of Jesus. Thursday, after they had shared a last supper together, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There he was arrested by the religious authorities and put on trial in the court of Caiaphas, the high priest. Jesus was charged with blasphemy: false religious teaching. Had Caiaphas heard sufficient evidence to find him guilty, he could have been sentenced to death by stoning.

The high priest then turned Jesus over to Pontius Pilate and charged him with the political crime of challenging the governing authority of Rome. Pilate, a political hack of the worst order, tested the winds of popular opinion by sticking a wet finger in the air. When a few strident voices shouted, “crucify him, crucify him,” the Roman governor condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion.

After Roman soldiers were certain of his death, some of his friends took his body down from the cross. They wrapped Jesus in a linen cloth that contained a hundred pounds of myrrh, aloes, and the other spices. Then they carefully placed Jesus’ body in a new tomb in a nearby garden cemetery.

Our gospel reading picks up the narrative at that point. John tells us that early Sunday morning while it was still dark Mary Magdalene went alone to the Tomb. When she arrived, she was stunned to find that the large stone covering the opening to the tomb had been removed. She raced back to where the closest followers of Jesus were staying.

When she arrived, she saw Simon Peter and an unnamed apostle, described as the “one whom Jesus loved,” and told them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” This little group of three ran back to the grave. The apostles crawled into the tomb to investigate. They found the burial clothes, but no body. The gospel writer observed that “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead”.

When the men left, Mary remained. As she wept, she bent down, looked into the tomb and saw two angels, dressed in white. The angels inquired as to why she was crying, and she responded, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (v. 13).

Mary came to the cemetery intending to grieve. She was surprised to find an empty tomb and concluded the body of Jesus had been stolen. Even after the apostles discovered the empty burial clothes, Mary remained clueless. It did not occur to her that this could be anything but the work of grave robbers. Even the appearance of angels did not get her to stop looking for a dead Jesus.

When she came out of the tomb, Jesus was standing there. Jesus spoke to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (v. 15). She mistook Jesus for a gardener. She even asked Jesus if he was the one who moved the body. A moment passed before Jesus simply said her name, “Mary.”

When she heard her name, she recognized Jesus. No one had stolen his body because He was no longer dead. Death could not destroy him. The grave could not hold him. He was risen.

With the sound of the risen Christ calling her name still sounding in her ears, Mary raced back to tell the other disciples. As she approached, she breathlessly shouted the news, “I have seen the Lord”

It did not all happen that day. It took more time, but eventually the full meaning of what Mary Magdalene reported dawned on the disciples. There was more significance in this than an empty tomb. The good news of

the gospel is not simply that Jesus lived in first-century Jerusalem. The gospel is that Christ lives today, and we can know Christ and the power of the resurrection. This is the message of Easter. We can be lifted from troubles to possibilities, from despair to joy, from fear to courage, and from defeat to victory. Our lives are worth living because Jesus indeed lives. This is the significance of Easter.

As central as that message is to the meaning of this day, I want us to think about why Mary didn't immediately recognize Jesus when she saw him standing outside the tomb. Jesus was no stranger to Mary, she was one of Jesus' closest followers. Why didn't she immediately recognize him?

For that matter, why was she even the slightest bit surprised by the empty tomb? She had heard Jesus predict his resurrection. Was she not paying attention when he said that? Why did she not come to the cemetery anticipating an empty tomb?

As people of faith, we claim the resurrection of Jesus the Christ as the greatest event in human history. According to the gospel of John, Mary was the first witness to the resurrection. As a good friend and loyal follower of Jesus, she should have taken one look at the stone rolled away and shouted, "Halleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed." Why didn't she do that?

This had been a long, terrifying, miserable weekend for Mary. She had watched while her friend and spiritual mentor was brutally killed. She had been there to help transport his dead body to the grave. She left before dawn to go to the garden with her heart overflowing with grief. Her mind must have been a repeating loop of scenes with blood, pain, and suffering.

When overwhelmed by grief, fear, and terrible memories, there is little room in the psyche to process much of anything else. As she stood outside the tomb crying, she must have felt as though never again would she know the deep joy and peace that she had known when she walked the hills of Galilee with Jesus.

What Mary was feeling is what we feel when the boss says, "You have done a great job for us, but we are making changes, and you are not in our plans. Your job has been eliminated. Here is a little severance pay. Good luck." It is being at the scene of the accident when the policeman tells you, "We have called the ambulance, but it appears your husband died of his injuries." It is the feeling that overwhelms you when the doctor says, "The lab reports are back. The results are not good. You have a very aggressive form of cancer." That was Mary's experience that morning in the garden. She felt as though her life had caved in. She was on the verge of being crushed by despair.

Yet Mary did not give up. She kept alive a tiny flicker of hope and faith's possibility. In spite of all that weekend's evidence to the contrary, Mary remained open to believing that the Creator and sustainer of this world is a God who intends things for good and not for harm; a God who promotes life rather than settling for death. Deep within her heart, Mary never gave up believing that God had not abandoned her and sooner or later, she would see the evidence of God's presence.

Frankly, her faith did not bear fruit easily or quickly. It did not happen when she realized the grave was empty. She was not impressed by the conversation with angels or by the sight of Jesus standing in the garden. For whatever reason, only when she heard Jesus speak her name did she grasp the significance of what was happening and she reacted by shouting, "I have seen the Lord" and her life was changed.

If she had lost hope and let herself be crushed by despair would Mary have even recognized the risen Christ when he called her name? I really do not know. But I am convinced that Elizabeth Barrett Browning had it right when she wrote,

“Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only those who see, take off their shoes, The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

Earth is absolutely crammed with evidence of God’s presence. However, the only people who even notice the divine within the ordinary are those who are open to the possibility of believing. If you are not willing to look at the world through eyes of faith, you will not likely notice that “every common bush is afire with God.” This openness to seeing the possibilities of faith is not easy to maintain. The dark underbelly of life’s negative circumstances can close our eyes to faith. Things can and do happen that cause us to despair and even to lose all hope. At best this means living with less joy. At worst, it means standing at the tomb in tears, clueless as to what it means, and wondering how you are going to go on from here.

No matter what the circumstances of your life, don’t lose hope. Remain open to the possibility of resurrection, the possibility of new life. You can be lifted from troubles to possibilities, from despair to joy, from fear to courage, from defeat to victory. Hold tight to this possibility: Because Christ lives you can face tomorrow. You can face your fears. You can even face your own death and be unafraid. Your life is truly worth living because Christ lives. This is the message of Easter.