

"JOY AT THE TOMB"  
John 20:1-18  
April 21, 2019 Easter  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

"Christ is Alive!" That's quite a claim we just sang. Maybe you expect me to prove the resurrection is true. It is Easter Sunday, after all. But I think what we need this morning are not theologians or scientists- what we need are storytellers.

*"At the entrance to Jerusalem's Church of All Nations, next to the Garden of Gethsemane, there is a sign warning every visitor: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH. This was intended to discourage talkative tour guides from disturbing the church's prayerful ambience with shouted lectures." (1) NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH!* Perhaps this is good advice for us this morning.

We live in a world where the dead stay dead. We believe in scientific facts and we know for a fact that dead people don't walk out of tombs. In trying to prove the facts of the resurrection of Jesus we risk trying to *tame a dangerous mystery into a manageable- and rather harmless- assumption.*

Easter is a day for proclamation, not explanation. It is a time to meet the One who changes everything.

*"The pagan writer Celsus complained that everybody saw Jesus die, but only a crazed woman and a few fanatics saw him alive again." (2)*

A lot of our skepticism about the resurrection could have easily been avoided if the Risen Christ had appeared to the government leaders like Pontius Pilate or the religious leaders in the Temple. Imagine what would have happened if he had appeared, in all his glory, at Caesar's throne. Surely that would have been written down and preserved over the centuries. It could have cleared up great misunderstandings and made my job a lot easier.

Richard Lischer cautions us. *"If the resurrection were meant to be a historically verifiable occurrence, God wouldn't have performed it in the dark without eyewitnesses. Resurrection was an event enacted between God and Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Not a single Gospel tells us how it happened. We don't know if it was a typically warm Palestinian morning or unseasonably cool. We*

*don't know if the earth shuddered when he arose or if it was unnaturally still. We don't know what he looked like when he was no longer dead, whether he burst from the tomb in glory or came out like Lazarus, slowly unwrapping his burial cloths and squinting with wonder against the dawn. It really happened, but we will never prove, or disprove, it historically." (Lischer)*

We live in a cemetery world where joy at the tomb seems impossible. We know that the dead stay dead and graves are not meant to be opened. That's what Mary thought too.

Mary Magdalen saw the whole terrible thing. On Friday she stood near that horrible, horrible cross with Jesus' mother and his aunt and she watched the whole thing. Her vision was probably blurred by her tears. Perhaps the women held one another as they wept. Can you imagine what that was like, standing there with his mother and watching him die?

Mary was from the town of Magdala. She was among the women whom Jesus had cured of evil spirits and infirmities. She became one of his most devout followers. I would even call her a disciple. She was not, contrary to popular belief and patriarchal revisionism, a prostitute. All four of the Gospel writers place her at the tomb that morning. Only John has her there alone.

As she approaches the tomb she sees that the large, heavy stone sealing the cave has been pushed to the side. She doesn't look inside but immediately runs to tell the male disciples that Jesus's body has been stolen. Peter and another disciples race to see for themselves.

They looked in and saw that it was, indeed, empty and the burial cloths were lying there. They believed she was telling them the truth. His body was gone so what did they do? Did they console Mary and each other? Did they discuss what might have happened? Did they remember what Jesus had told them? No, they didn't understand. So they simply went back home.

Once again Mary is alone. John tells us four times that she is weeping. Of course she is weeping. It was bad enough that he died a cruel death. But now, grave robbers have taken his body. It was more than she could bear. She finally bent over and looked into the tomb and there she saw two angels who asked her a rather obvious question. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Maybe she wanted to ask them, "Why aren't **you**?" She told them that she doesn't know where his body has been taken.

Mary is preoccupied with his missing body. It was all she had left of him. Seeing the empty tomb did not prod her to faith. All it did was cause her more distress, such distress apparently, that it didn't even faze her that she was talking to two angels. The angels were of no help so she turns away and sees someone standing there. She doesn't recognize him but he knows her.

He too asks her, "Why are you weeping?" She thinks he is the groundskeeper and asks him if he is the one who moved the body. She even offers to take the body herself. All she knows is that her beloved teacher and leader is now just a corpse and she must do what she can to show him honor and respect.

But then he says one word, just one, and her world is changed forever. He speaks her name. "Mary," he says.

And in that instant she knows who he is. The moment the resurrection is declared is when Jesus speaks her name. It isn't the sound of his voice that makes her recognize him, it is sound of her own name on his lips.

The actual encounter between Mary and Jesus occupies just four of the eighteen verses in this text. Four verses that changed the world. When Jesus speaks her name her world (and ours) is broken open. Something illogical, impossible, and unnatural has happened. It is a new day where the dead do not stay dead.

It's time to stop weeping, Mary, you have work to do.

The Risen Christ calls her name and commissions her to preach the good news. "Go tell the others," he says. She is the first to preach the gospel that Jesus has been raised. She was the first resurrection preacher in scripture. She is his apostle to the disciples.

When Mary left her home in the darkness early that morning to make her way to the cemetery, resurrection was the last thing on her mind. In her grief Mary made the mistake of assuming the worst. So did his other disciples. Even though Jesus had told them several times that he would die and would rise again, none of them expected resurrection.

They lived in a cemetery world. No one ran to the tomb that morning giddy with excitement to see if it had happened yet. For Mary, resurrection was the last thing on her mind.

Easter asks us: What if it is the first thing on ours? What difference would it make if we lived as though the resurrection were true? If we spend all of our time trying to prove it then we don't have the time and energy to live as resurrection

people. Resurrection does more than just call us to believe certain things. It calls us to become a particular kind of people. We no longer live in a cemetery world. Joy at the tomb is now not only possible, but expected.

What does it mean for us and for our world if death does not have the last word? What do we do with this new creation? This unimaginable future?

With one word, her name, Mary Magdalen is transformed from the last mourner of the dead Jesus into the first witness to the living Christ. And we can be transformed too. We are called this Easter morning to embrace the Easter experience and allow it to transform us.

Easter isn't something we remember as a past event. It is something we live and breathe. Easter has consequences. The resurrection isn't merely an idea or a theological concept or an excuse to put flowers on the cross. It is something we become. It is something we "prove" only by the living of our lives.

Rowan Williams describes it this way: *"The believer's life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment, and enlargement."*

*"Christ came to save us from our least selves. That's the gift and the challenge of the resurrection. The first disciples, so scattered and shamed by the events of Holy Week, made this perfectly clear when their broken and bewildered community was restored to life." (Friedrich)*

For me, the church is all the proof I need for the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that we exist over two thousand years after a man called Jesus was tortured and killed on the cross, is mind-boggling. What could cause such a thing to happen besides the grace of God and joy at the tomb?

Resurrection is about healing and restoration of wounded and severed relationships-between God and humanity, between human persons, and ultimately among all of God's creation. One Orthodox theologian puts it this way: *"The Resurrection is not the resuscitation of a body; it is the beginning of the transfiguration of the world."*

The most important question that can be asked of a congregation is this: is there any evidence of the resurrection in this place, among these people? Are we alive with the Spirit of the Risen Christ? Or do we just stand weeping at the tomb and expect to find only death in the cemetery?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ achieves its most documentable meaning in the faith communities that embrace the call of the Risen Christ. The proof of it is right in front of us. When people feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and free the oppressed we see the Risen Christ. When people support families at our southern border, relieve famine in Yemen, and call for an end to war we see the Risen Christ. When congregations welcome LGBTQ Christians we see the Risen Christ. When we refuse to allow partisan politics to define our life together we see the Risen Christ. When we take a stand against white supremacy and do the hard work of healing racism we see the Risen Christ. When we speak hope in a hopeless world we see the Risen Christ.

It isn't always easy, in our world, to see and believe in the transformative power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Remember that Jesus came to show us what the fullness of God's love looks like.

Even though on Friday, at the foot of the cross, it looked like nothing, especially love, could stand up against the most powerful government on the face of the earth. But on Sunday there was joy at the tomb.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us: *"Easter says to us that despite everything to the contrary, God's will for us will prevail, love will prevail over hate, justice will prevail over injustice and oppression, peace will prevail over exploitation and bitterness."*

I can't prove the resurrection to you. But I can show you what it looks like when the Risen Christ is running around loose in our world. It looks like this place.

May others look at this congregation and know that Easter has consequences. May we continue to be a resurrection community alive with the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

Thanks be to God!

Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

Amen.

End Notes:

- "Don't Explain It," Jim Friedrich, *Christian Century*, April 10, 2019. Pg. 10.
- "We Have Seen the Lord", Richard Lischer, *Christian Century*, March 17, 1999.

