

Isaiah 25:6-9  
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
JOHN 20:1-18

## **“Because he lives”**

Darkness and depression. Those are the first images we get from the opening of John’s Gospel this morning, Easter Sunday morning. “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.” Mary Magdalene, a woman who Jesus had healed of unknown illnesses who had become one of his most prominent and devoted disciples, was one of the few followers of Jesus who had the courage and devotion to stay with him on Good Friday all the way to his death and burial. That had been depressing enough – but now she saw the empty tomb and all she could conclude was that someone had stolen Jesus’ body, perhaps to do something vicious to it. How could she not be even more depressed?

The alternate Gospel reading for this morning this year is Mark 16:1-8, which describes several women coming to the tomb Easter morning and finding it empty, but being met by angels who told them that Christ was raised from the dead. The initial response of these brave women – the men didn’t even have the guts to show up to pay their respects at the grave of someone who had been executed by the Roman Empire on a charge of sedition – was *fear*. Mark writes, “Terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Can we relate to these women or what? We have experienced terror: 9/11 was not that long ago and not that far away, and anthrax was mailed that fall just a few miles from here. Iraq, Afghanistan, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Binghamton and a thousand smaller events just as terrifying. Fear: big companies vanishing into thin air, five million jobs lost in the last 16 months just in this country alone, retirement savings and college savings hit hard enough to force unexpected and undesired changes in many peoples’ plans, fear of what may still be ahead, fear of what will happen when the bills come due for this massive federal deficit spending. Fear, fear, fear. F.D.R. actually was wrong when he memorably said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” although fear can multiply irrationally. We do in fact have lots to fear. God knows we do.

And over all the other fears is the primal human fear of extinction of death followed by...nothing.

God knows our fears.

Our fears all come together on Good Friday afternoon: the fear that good people will always get destroyed by ruthless, power-hungry organizations like the Roman Empire (or you-name-it), the fear that peace is for wimps, love is for suckers, and that life itself is just a long, sick, cruel practical joke played on people who thought maybe life has meaning and purpose. Seeing Jesus' tortured, lifeless body hanging on the cross, attracting the interest of insects and of vultures, was devastating beyond description for those who loved Jesus, and who thought he was The One to make everything different, to change the world forever. Those who had left everything to follow him now had – what? Not even their own self-respects, since so many were in hiding. It was a follower of Jesus of whom we hadn't previously heard, Joseph of Arimathea, who stepped up and gave Jesus' body a decent burial.

No wonder Mary Magdalene was depressed. No wonder she could not see any good news “while it was still dark” that Easter morning. An empty tomb by itself was not good news, certainly not *The Good News*.

But she was not paralyzed by her depression; she *ran* and told two male disciples to come and see, which they did, running also. And then, Peter and the unnamed Beloved Disciple returned to their homes – seemingly unchanged, just as some people will come to Easter services all over the world today and go home seemingly unchanged.

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” Two angels spoke to her, but she almost ignored them, and her mood was unchanged. Angels, big deal. She wanted Jesus. No one else would do.

And that is who she got.

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” he asked her. Still weeping so hard she could not see clearly, or perhaps not facing him, or not recognizing his voice yet because her mind could not yet let her do so, Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener.

In a way, she was right. He was there to plant the faith in her. She would be the first to know, the first to share, the first to have her life radically, wonderfully transformed, this time *forever*. Depression? Fear? Pah!

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’”

That's all it took. Jesus gently, kindly reached out to her in the midst of her grief and *called her by name*. She was the very first to have a *personal relationship with the risen Christ*, the very first to realize that peace and love are in fact *more* powerful than violence and hate, that life is *more* powerful than death, that no matter what happens to any or all of us or to the world, God's ultimate purposes will be fulfilled.

She was changed on Easter morning. Big time.

She became “the apostle to the apostles.” Nice, isn’t it: women could not even testify in court in First Century Palestine if there were any male witnesses at all to an incident. All you need to know about what God thinks about that kind of attitude is who God picked to be the first to bear witness to the biggest news in the history of the world: Christ is risen.

Christ’s resurrection means that all whom God calls to him have the promise of eternal life, that death is *an* end, *not* the end, and that on the other side of death is **new** life by the grace, power and love of God through Our Lord Jesus Christ. Easter gives us the hope of an eternal dawn beyond our personal sunsets. Personally, we can therefore live our lives lightened by that dawn which is to come, rather than darkened by the sunset which inevitably will come first.

Even Jesus died. So will we. But that’s not the end ultimately.

But there’s more meaning to Easter, much more. It is the “two-sided coin” of evangelism and outreach. There are people, many people, who are living lives deeply shadowed by the knowledge of their own sunsets and those of others who need to hear of **the hope for eternal life** in Jesus Christ. And there are people, many people, who are experiencing very reality-based fear and depression because of what they are going through right now in their lives. The message of Easter is also for Christians to **become new life for others** by the power of the risen Christ.

Opportunities abound for being new life for others: empowering the unemployed, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, teaching those who eagerly want to learn new skills, helping people change their lives through 12 step programs, banishing bigotry are just a few. Our own congregation’s four Mission Priorities are the struggles against Addiction, against Domestic Violence, against Hunger and Homelessness, and against Racism. We work on these efforts because people around the world and down the street need to experience new life, and together we can make a difference in all these ways and others as well.

But the only way we can spread hope and be new life for others is if we receive both ourselves by *a personal relationship with the risen Christ*. He calls each of us by name this Easter Sunday, and everyday.

Do we go back to our homes unchanged, or do we turn to him and let him strengthen and guide us, replenish us, perhaps start a new relationship with us or a relationship at a deeper level?

Jesus comes to each of us whatever our circumstances, and his strength can get us through the challenges we face and inevitably will face in the future.

Let me conclude by quoting Marisa Giacomo of L’Aquila, Italy, devastated last week by an earthquake: “I lost everything, but I still have God.”

No matter what, so do we.

“Because he lives,  
I can face tomorrow.  
Because he lives, all fear is gone.  
Because I know he holds the future,  
And life is worth the living just because He lives.”

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard

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