

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon  
Date: 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday  
Lesson: John 20:1-18

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“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.” This is a story we know. Mary goes and tells Peter and another disciple. These two men both come running to the tomb, which is found to only contain the cloth and linen wrappings that once had bound the body of Jesus. Not certain what to make of it, these two men return to their homes. But Mary... she remains. She stood there at that tomb weeping, we are told. Perhaps weeping tears of not knowing what to make of a tomb with no body in it. Perhaps weeping because not only has her friend, her teacher, her Lord been killed, but someone has unceremoniously messed with his body. Perhaps she is weeping tears that question whether the path her life has taken -- being fully invested in the ministry of Jesus -- was all for naught. Had she been misguided? Had she taken a path that has no real way to back-up and start over again? Perhaps she is weeping outside of that tomb because she is now completely uncertain what the future might hold for her. Her weeping could have been the result of any of those possibilities. It could have been the result of all of those possibilities. The story we know simply says she remained outside the tomb weeping.

Yet the story also tells us that as she wept, Mary looked within the tomb and was shocked to find that two messengers had appeared out of nowhere. They asked her why she weeps, and she responds, “They have taken away my Lord.” There is no particular people in mind to embody this “they.” It could have been anyone who -- for whatever reason -- wanted to disturb the corpse that had been laid in this tomb.

So the point is not so much who the “they” is; the point is that after Friday’s events, the only hope that Mary Magdalene had left was to pay respect to the corpse of her mentor one final time. Yet in these early morning hours, she arrives to discover that even that hope has been taken from her. Dead bodies shouldn’t be messed with. God only knows what is in the heart of the one responsible for this. Jesus’ body should still be where it was placed on Friday. Mary had invested her entire self into Jesus: her dreams, her time, her life. Not only is he dead, but now he is gone completely. Even the shell of the promise that God had some good news for her life has been taken from her.

“They have taken away my Lord.” These are words that have been spoken by countless others, in one form or another. They are often spoken during that common human experience of taking our dreams, our time, our life and placing them into something, only to see that something struggle... or worse. And after these dreams have been broken, we would like to at least pay some respect to the shell of the promise that God has some good news for us. But sometimes even the shell of that promise can’t be found. We see loved ones wrestling with addictions and our prayers seem to go unanswered. “They have taken away my Lord.” Our thought-through plans don’t pan out in the ways we had foreseen. “They have taken away my Lord.” The diagnosis and all the prayers that pleaded for recovery. “They have taken away my Lord.” This is a story we know. Human life can seem so dark -- so bleak -- at times, and in those times our hearts can empathize with Mary Magdalene when she stands outside the tomb weeping.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” While it was still dark, while the hope was gone, God was up to something. While it was still dark,

while doubts and despair were still readily at hand, God was already up and at ‘em. Some of God’s best work is when humans find their plans shattered. Some of God’s best work is when we feel things have reached a dead end. This is not just an act that God performs, it is the very nature of God. When the world sees a cross, God sees salvation. When the world sees the end of all hope, God sees that as the perfect place for hope. When the tomb says, “the end,” God declares “new life.” “While it was still dark,” God rolls the stone away for us. This is a story we know.

There are indeed times when our hopes escape us. When we weep. When we are weighed down. When the path we have traveled comes to a dead end. You and I can empathize with those disciples who plod along, aimlessly and hopelessly, after the events of Friday. You and I know that this world can throw a whole lot at us, and it certainly throws around injustices, heartaches, and hardships. But none of those events in life are a match for God. Because even when we are overcome with doubts and dead ends, God can still roll away that stone in those dark hours that will lead us to a new day.

Our resurrection faith is not blind optimism, though. We know that bad things will continue to happen in life. The resurrection faith is hope. It is hope not just for what awaits us after death. Resurrection faith is hope now for those who are experiencing injustices, experiencing heartaches, and experiencing hardships. It is the hope that even when everything convinces us to say in desperation, “They have taken away my Lord,” God is already at work in the darkness. Paraphrasing The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, “In the silence, the stillness, and the darkness, God is already working through the rumblings of the earth that are beyond our hearing.”

This resurrection hope is at the core of our faith, and resurrection hope is what we have to offer to the world. Our hope says that no matter what may come, no matter how bad things are, and no matter how dark the darkness is, God's word of grace and promise of new life will prevail. While it was still dark, Mary approached the tomb, truly having no hope at all. While it was still dark, the weight of injustices, heartaches, and hardships weigh us down. While it was still dark, the pains and the sorrows, the tragedies and the death, may still be overwhelming. Yet God's best work is accomplished in the midst of that darkness. So when we are compelled to ask, "Who will make sense of this mess?" "Who will lift me out of this miry pit?" "Who will bring some light to this darkness?" The answer is: God will.

The tomb will not have the final word. God will have the final word, thank you very much, and God's final word is "life." So when the world tells us that we should be plodding along with our shattered plans weighing us down, we can shout back that God's word of grace and promise of new life will prevail even in the still dark hours. This is a story we know. God empowers us to look to that cross and to that empty tomb, and we can proclaim that God was triumphant when everyone thought it was Jesus' defeat; we can proclaim that God's undying love has overcome humanity's hate; we can proclaim that death has done its worst, and it was no match for the power of God; we can proclaim that God has made a way when there was no way.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This is a story we know. Alleluia and Amen!