

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 17, 2022

John 20:1-18

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. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Each of the gospels has a different way of telling this story.

John's depiction of the miracle of Easter. It reveals some spiritual truths that are critical to our ability to navigate grief and loss together, and to claim on this very day the promises of Easter. What I found in my study of scripture is that more often than not the most important lessons are hidden sometimes between or after a comma. The first lesson is like that .It's in the very first verse of the 20th chapter of John and has to do with the timing of resurrection. Scripture says, "that early, on the first day, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." Don't miss that tucked between a couple commas, Mary went 'while it was still dark.' That means that

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Mary journeys to the tomb before the light of a new day has revealed itself. Mary journeys in darkness, and it's a particular kind of darkness that she journeys in. It is the darkness of death and despair.

Her teacher, her friend, the one that she had placed all her hope in, was no longer. She had seen him hung on a cross, and then according to the gospel of John, wrapped and taken away by Joseph of Arimathea and laid in a tomb in a garden. She had seen it happen. The darkness that she walks in that day is not just the literal darkness, but also the spiritual darkness of what it looks like when we have lost all of our hope and all the possibility of our lives.

Scripture says that Mary 'found the tomb empty.' If Mary finds the tomb empty, then that means that resurrection happened. It is still dark while Mary is grieving, while she is in denial, while she is angry, while she is bargaining with God, while she is depressed. Resurrection happens while it is still dark, and if that's true for Mary on this Easter morning, then it is also true for each of us, beloved, that on this day as we make our way to the tomb, we very well might be walking in darkness. But that would be the exact place where the power of God is at work bringing new life. Another secret, but important spiritual truth tucked in this text, is in verse 14. She's already been asked once "Why woman are you weeping?" She's been asked by a couple angels. She explains to them that "they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she said this, scripture says, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. Here's the key, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

If it is indeed true that Mary turned and found the risen Christ standing there before her, and yet could not recognize him, then there is a significant spiritual truth about resurrection. Resurrection, when it happens, will look differently than we imagine it will look. This is the one that she has broken bread with, the one that she has spent time on seashores and in rooms locked. She has spent time with this Jesus. She knows this man's face. Three years, the very least, they spent together, and yet, on that Easter morning, she turns around and he's standing right in front of her, and she does not recognize him. That's significant for us because sometimes we imagine that instead of resurrection, what we experience on this day, is some sort of revival. The old thing brought back to life. That's not what happens. That's not what we claim this day. What we claim is that the God of all creation is at work bringing about a brand new thing.

It's the resurrection of our Lord, not the revival of Jesus. He doesn't look the same. He doesn't have the same spirit. He doesn't have the same presence. Something has changed significantly enough that one who knows him, perhaps better than anyone else in the entire world, does not recognize him, and that means that if it's true for Mary it's probably true for us too.

If we go to the tomb expecting to see the old thing brought back to life, we are going to be disappointed because that's not the business that God is in. The business that God is in is not reviving, but resurrecting, bringing forth something brand new something that we might not even recognize when it's staring us in the face. It's true in our marriages and true in our parenting and it's true in our friendships. We expect the old thing to come back to life. Then we've gone to the tomb looking for the wrong thing, but if we are open to a brand new thing springing forth,

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then we are, where Mary was when he said her name and she called him teacher.

It's interesting just before that scripture tells us that she "supposed him to be the gardener" I think this is the final important spiritual truth tucked into the text of John this day. Mary, supposing him to be the gardener, tells him "Just tell me where you have taken him and I will go and I'll take his body away."

It's important because she could have imagined him or supposed him to be any sort of person in that time, maybe a guard or maybe a disciple that she didn't know all too well or maybe someone who was just wandering through that garden that day who had stumbled upon an empty tomb and decided to come in. She could have imagined him to be any person that day, but instead she imagines him to be the gardener, and that's critical for us as well. Henry Mitchell tells us the "The gardener is the one who has seen everything ruined so many times. Even as his pain increases with each loss, the garden comprehends, indeed truly knows, that where there was a garden once. It can be again, or where there never was, there yet can be a garden, and that means that the God that Mary meets on Easter morning is a God that knows what it looks like to look out on a field and to see things die and pass away. But to trust and still believe that, in that field, a new garden can grow, The God that Mary meets on Easter morning looks out upon a field that's never known a healthy crop and can imagine what a garden might look like there." If it was true for Mary that morning, it's true for us on this Easter morning

in the different fields of our lives. Fields that have known beautiful verdant life that have passed away, and those that have never known it. The God that we know in Christ Jesus is acquainted with the ruin of those fields and is acquainted with the new life that can come from them.

This morning we celebrate Easter. As we celebrate Easter, we celebrate the end of our Lenten journey together.

If you've walked with Idlewild through this season of lent, then my prayer is that you feel more equipped after these some seven Sundays to navigate loss in your own life, but also to navigate it together. I pray that you feel more equipped with a vocabulary to discuss your group grief and our grief together, to name your grief and our grief, to understand it and to notice when you see denial or anger or bargaining or depression or even acceptance. When you see those things to name and understand what they are in your life and in the world. Beyond the new vocabulary, I hope we have now a biblical grounding to understand the complexities of grief. I pray that we are grounded together in Matthew 16, Peter's denial of the impending suffering of Jesus. I pray that we are grounded in Matthew 21, Jesus's anger as he enters the temple and turns over the tables and then the next day kills a fig tree for no reason besides impending grief. I pray that we are grounded in Mark 14, where Jesus bargains with God as his friends' sleep. "Take this cup. but not my will. but yours." I pray that we are grounded in Matthew 27, where Jesus is overwhelmed with depression as he laments before God. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" I finally pray that we are grounded in John 19 as Jesus accepts his fate and falls into the flow of

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the divine by giving up his spirit. On this Easter morning, may we trust anew that resurrection is happening while it is still dark, while you are in the midst of your darkness, while our world is in the midst of its darkness.

May we cling to the truth of the gospel, that there is something happening in that darkness. May we also not be surprised when resurrection looks differently than we imagine it ought to look. When we turn around and new life is staring us in the face, and we don't even recognize it.

May we rest this day, beloved, in the good news that the one that authors resurrection is the one who has tended fields from all eternity, has seen gardens rise and pass away, and in every field imagines the brand new verdant thing that can grow there.

We began our Lenten journey with an excerpt from a poem by our nation's first youth poet laureate and the youngest poet to address the presidential inauguration, Amanda Gorman. We end our Lenten journey with the work of hers entitled, "The Miracle of Mourning."

I thought I'd awaken to a world in mourning.
Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.
But there's something different on this golden morning.
Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.

I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.
Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.
A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.
She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.

While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,
Our people have never been more closely tethered.
The question isn't if we can weather this unknown,
But how we will weather this unknown together.

So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.
Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.

As one, we will defeat both despair and disease.
We stand with healthcare heroes and all employees;

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With families, libraries, waiters, schools, artists;
Businesses, restaurants, and hospitals hit hardest.

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,
For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.
In this chaos, we will discover clarity.
In suffering, we must find solidarity.

For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,
Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.
So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.

Read children's books, dance alone to DJ music.
Know that this distance will make our hearts grow fonder.
From these waves of woes our world will emerge stronger.

We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind
Are also the moments that make us humans kind;
Let each morning find us courageous, brought closer;
Heeding the light before the fight is over.
When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing
In testing times, we became the best of beings.

May the promise of Easter be true for you this morning. May it be true for our world. May it be so in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all.
Amen.