

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
April 21, 2019 – Easter
Title: Easter Hope
Scripture: Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

It was still dark that morning when Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. She came in deep sorrow. She and her close friends had probably spent most of the last two days in tears. Jesus had been killed and with him, all their hopes and dreams had also died.

They grieved not only because someone they loved had died, but also because that person had brought hope into their lives. Hope that they would be set free from Roman oppression. Hope that there would be justice in their world. There were so many things that Jesus had taught them; so many ways he had let them know that their lives mattered. He had brought hope into their lives but now that hope was dead along with Jesus.

Our perspective on a situation profoundly affects how we see and hear what is happening around us, and we can see that so clearly in what happened next. Mary came and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. Jesus was dead and now his tomb was empty.

In fear, probably anger, and a whole lot of despair she came to the only conclusion that made sense to her. Someone had taken Jesus' body away and she didn't know where it was. She

ran to find Peter and John and share with them this terrible news; this additional horrible blow to what had already been a horrendous few days.

Peter and John were shocked beyond belief. They had to see for themselves, so they ran to the tomb. They discovered that Mary was right; the tomb was empty. But somehow it didn't make sense that someone had come and taken Jesus body away. The cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus body for burial was still there.

John's gospel – presumably written by the disciple John, the one he calls the “other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” tells us that he, the second disciple believed. We want to believe that he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, but that is not immediately clear because as he writes “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” Maybe they now believed only Mary's account that the body was missing, or maybe they were beginning to believe more but it was still too early for them to understand what it meant.

God is very aware of and understands our humanness. God created us as humans. God came to us as a human through Jesus. Jesus was born as a human baby. He lived as a human child. He experienced hunger, and thirst, and pain and suffering, and joy and sorrow just as we do.ⁱ

We can be assured that no matter what we experience in our lives as humans, God understands. Our God is not a faraway being of power and might. Our God is up close and personal.

Jesus faced death just as we all will one day. As a man, Jesus wished to avoid the suffering. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that if it were possible that he might avoid the suffering and death. But as the Son of God, he also knew that a greater good would be served by his death, and he submitted to death rather than running away and hiding.

Jesus suffered a horrible, humiliating, excruciatingly painful death on a tree, but here on the third day, God has done a new and amazing thing. God raised him from the dead.

God understands our humanity better than we do. As we celebrate Easter today, we see all the events of Easter and the miracle of Jesus' new life set against the backdrop of the humanity of Mary Magdalene and the disciples. We can see that humanness in Mary's response – "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

We see it in the response of Peter and John who could not believe what Mary Magdalene was telling them but had to see for themselves. We see it in their response to the empty tomb where we are told simply that they returned to their homes.

As humans we forget. Jesus had told his disciples that he would face death and be crucified. He had told them that he would rise from the dead on the third day. But this was so far beyond their reality that they could not comprehend what he was telling them. Here, when it mattered most, they didn't remember what he had told them. It made no more sense to them now, then it did when Jesus had tried to explain it to them.

This past week, I received word of the death of a wonderful man. I had the privilege of spending a couple of hours with him a few weeks ago. He had cancer and certainly did not want to die. He did not want to leave his wife and adult children. He wanted to live longer, but at the same time, he was at peace. He spent the last few weeks of his earthly life saying thank you and good-bye to people who had been important in his life. He spent time saying the things he wanted to say to those he cared about. When his earthly body was ready to give up, his spirit was also ready to make that transition.

Not all of us have that kind of opportunity to spend time with those we love either as they die or as we face our own death. But we can be assured that death does not have the last word. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God declared that death is not the winner. God is; and always will be. And because of that, we

can be assured that while death is an end to many things, it is not THE end.

As humans we are sometimes afraid. We are often afraid of what we can't control and what we can't understand.ⁱⁱ We need to come up with an answer and the only one that makes sense here is that someone has taken Jesus' body away.

After the disciples left, Mary remained at the tomb weeping. This is when Jesus appeared to her. But locked into her perceptions of what was going on, she assumed that he was the gardener. She asked him to take her to where they had laid Jesus body so that she could take him away.

Jesus met her in the middle of her fear; in the middle of her grief. Jesus called her by name, "Mary". It was at that moment, in the intimate use of her name that Mary recognized him for who he was, her teacher, the one she loved, the one who loved her, the one who had valued her as a precious child of God. The good news came to her right in the middle of all her fear, her confusion, her emotion. God didn't wait until she had it figured out, but good news came to her when she needed it most.

All her perceptions were suddenly changed. She went from great sadness, from believing that someone had taken Jesus' body away, to suddenly discovering that Jesus was standing right

in front of her. Mary discovered that what she “thought was a missing body was actually a living body.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God doesn't wait for us to figure things out. God comes to us in the middle of our fear, in the middle of our confusion. God calls us by name. In the middle of our perceptions of what is happening and what it means, God comes to offer us another vision, an alternate reality, that can bring life even out of death.

It doesn't mean that a loved one hasn't died, but God can show us a new beginning. God offers a reality that means there is still life for us, a good life, even in the midst of human pain and sorrow.

Because Jesus conquered death and rose from the dead, we can live after death not only in eternity, but here and now in memories that are cherished and continue to influence the lives of those we have left behind. When our hearts have been broken because someone we love has died, we can still live after death. We can live in ways that witness to how our loved one has helped us to become the people we are today.

When the doctor has used the word we most dread, when our employer has spoken the words we fear, when life seems to have changed suddenly, we quickly make assumptions about what this will mean. It can be very easy to get caught in our first

perceptions, and then to get locked into seeing things only one way.

Easter proclaims that what we immediately assume does not need to be the future reality. Easter proclaims that there is hope in the middle of despair. Easter proclaims that there is life even when all we can see is death.

Jesus told Mary to “go and tell” the disciples what had happened – and she did. “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them” what Jesus had said to her.

Throughout the rest of the New Testament we see the results. We see that the disciples went and told others. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard, Peter preaches about the risen Savior. In the home of a Gentile, someone with whom Peter would never have previously associated, he proclaims the new truth that he has come to learn. “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35 CEB)

The news of Jesus’ resurrection is such great news that we cannot keep it to ourselves. We do a disservice to the world if we

keep it to ourselves. We deny the possibilities of hope to others when we keep it to ourselves.

I would leave us with three thoughts.^{iv}

First – these events took place more than 2,000 years ago but are still of huge importance for us today. I invite you to think about what the resurrection of Jesus means for you. Ask yourself, “What impact does it have on the way that I live my life?”

Secondly- We can, and often do, have a sense of what’s going on that’s a little off the mark. We expect Jesus to look and act in a particular way. So, let’s ask ourselves, “Who and what are we looking for when we look for the movement of Christ? How will we know when we have found it?”

Finally - “Peter shared the story of the risen Christ by preaching. Paul shared it through the written word. Mother Teresa shared it through caring for the poor. St. Augustine said, ‘preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words.’”^v Ask yourself, “How am I called to share the good news of the risen Christ?”

ⁱ Some of the notes and thoughts about Jesus’ humanity are featured as well in a Preaching Theme note found in Abingdon Preaching Annual 2019 for Easter Sunday.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Lockhart-Gilroy, Annie. www.gbod.org/worship points to explore for “Easter 2019, Part 1: Living”

^{iv} This next section is adapted, and in some cases quoted, from Annie Lockhart-Gilroy.

^v Ibid