

April 4, 2021
Easter Sunday
The Hope of Easter
Scripture: John 20:1-18

At Easter, it's always a challenge to want to say something new, something profound, something that will make a difference. And this year, I gathered so many pages of notes and ideas and themes that I could talk for a very long time. But the reality is that the message of Easter doesn't need profound words from me, because Easter speaks for itself.

After a long year of pandemic and isolation we need the message of Easter. After mass shootings and riots, we need the message of Easter. After and during political turmoil, racial unrest, economic uncertainty, we need the message of Easter.

Easter tells us that there is always hope and possibility, no matter what is happening around us. Easter is God's message to us that the worst thing that is happening is never the last thing. Easter reminds us that God has perfect vision and knowledge – and we do not.

On Friday, Jesus' followers were devastated. The one they followed and loved was dead. Even though Jesus had tried to explain to them what would happen, they had not understood – and with Jesus' death their hopes died. Now as Mary made her way to the tomb filled with grief, she discovered that the tomb was empty and Jesus' body was gone. "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid him." Simon Peter and John ran back with her and discovered that, indeed, Jesus' body was gone. We are told that they did not yet understand that Jesus was to rise from the dead and so they returned to their homes. The world had become even darker.

Distraught, Mary stayed by the tomb weeping. And that's when everything started to change. Now Mary bent over to look into the tomb. What she saw was very different than what Peter and John had seen. She saw two angels who asked her why she was weeping. Then she turned around and saw a man whom she assumed was the gardener. He also asked why she was weeping. She asked him to show her where he had moved the body.

At this point she spoke her name, "Mary". She had not recognized him before. Through her tears and grief, she did not recognize his voice. But when he spoke her name, immediately her vision cleared, and she knew that it was Jesus standing in front of her. "Rabbouni" she exclaimed. "Teacher".

She must have reached out to hug him. She probably had a ton of questions she wanted to ask. Her tears of sorrow likely changed to tears of joy. She may have been speechless or giddy with excitement.

This was the moment when Resurrection was announced to the world. This was the moment that Frederick Buechner (*Beek-ner*) was likely referring to when he wrote, "Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing." For Mary, the worst thing was that Jesus had been killed, but then an even worse thing happened – his body disappeared, and she assumed that someone had stolen it. Now there was nothing left. But the worst thing was not the last thing. Because after the very worst had happened, suddenly Jesus was standing in front of her.

For me, Easter proclaims several messages. God pays attention to our grief, our fear, our confusion, whatever it is that we are feeling. Those feelings are real; they are part of life; and God cares. In his account of the Resurrection, John refers to Mary's tears no less than four times. In his gospel, the first words spoken by the resurrected Christ are about the meaning of her tears. No matter what is happening in our lives, Christ cares. Sometimes we are so consumed with our grief, our fear, our confusion, our anger, our shame, that our vision is clouded, and we are not able to see or recognize the angels around us. We are not able to recognize the risen Christ with us, the Holy Spirit sent to comfort and guide us.

But then, in some way, Christ speaks our name, and our eyes are opened just as Mary's were and we see where Christ has been working in our lives even in the midst of the horrible. We begin to be able to see that God can take the most horrible thing we can imagine and bring something hopeful and positive out of it. The devastating thing does not need to destroy us because God defeated the power of death or evil to have the last word.

Mary wanted to grasp onto Jesus, to hold onto him, but he would not let her. Everything had changed. She was not to cling to what was, what had been, but to look

to what was new, what had changed, what could be. Instead of holding onto him, she was being sent out by him. He gave her a commission, a purpose: Go and tell my brothers.

So many times we want to hold onto what was. How often have you thought about wanting to go back to a different time, a time when you thought things were better. This year especially, we have probably all talked about and yearned for when we could “get back to normal”. But what do we mean by that?

Certainly, there are things that we did before that we desperately want to do again. We want to be able to hug grandchildren or friends. We want to greet each other with a hug or even a handshake. We want to be able to sit with others and have something to eat. We want to see the smile on someone’s face not hidden by a mask. These are the things that we want to go back to “normal”, the things we cling to.

But we have also learned that there were many things that were not working. We have learned a lot during this year, and we are in a new time. When we are able to do some of those things we have missed, we also need to carry with us into the future some of the things we have learned.

We have become much more aware of the economic disparity among people. Some of us were able to fairly easily transition to working remotely, but too many had to risk their lives daily in jobs that were so essential that they required a person to be present in person.

We have learned some of the many ways that we have continued to perpetuate racial injustice. I’d like to believe that we have learned enough and committed ourselves to making a real difference in these important areas.

We have learned how truly connected we are with the rest of the world. We have learned that the actions of people we will never know really do affect us, and that our actions affect the lives of others. We have learned that we need to be intentional about looking out for the needs of others, not just our own. I pray that we will take this with us into our new world.

“Go and tell my brothers”. Mary was sent out as the first witness to the resurrection. Only a short while after she had been consumed by her tears and grief,

her testimony to the disciples was spoken with authority and clarity, “I have seen the Lord” and she told them what Jesus had said to her.

She was a messenger of hope and we are called to be the same. Hope is not just a pie in the sky emotion. Hope is an active dynamic that changes lives and changes history. It is the agent and engine of change and transformation.

Dr. Jerome Groopman, who holds a chair in medicine at Harvard, proclaimed, “Hope give us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity, to surmount them.”ⁱ It is true that no matter how dark the world seems, no matter how terrible the storm, light does come again. Easter proclaims this, and our experience witnesses to it. When we remember this, we can once again, hear Christ speak our name, tenderly acknowledging our emotions and our circumstances, and then reminding us that the worst thing is never the last thing, and that the sun will shine, and that the Holy Spirit will fill us with hope that we are then called to share with others.

Hope is the message that we are called to share. We are witnesses to the hope. The Apostle Peter describes the spirit with which we live and face life as a “living hope”. (I Peter 1:3) Hope changes everything.

When we are able to see a glimmer of light, a glimmer of hope, that hope grows. Hope is endless and renewable and the more we see it, the more it grows and the more powerful it becomes.

Easter proclaims hope in the midst of darkness, life in the middle of death, hope in the midst of despair, and a promise that we are never alone. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Let us pray:

God of new dawns, new awakenings, new life,
we hear your voice this morning saying,
“I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love.
With unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself.”
On this Easter day, you tell us we will be rebuilt and made new.
In gratitude we hear you, Living God, and we believe you.
And so we will celebrate the gift of new life in Christ,
even in the midst of fear.
You give us eyes to see through tears,
songs to sing with throats tight with emotion.
We know you help the weary rise up out of the ashes.
Give us the courage to be your light and hope in this world today.
Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Groopman, Jerome in “The Anatomy of Hope” quoted by Adam Hamilton in “Why” p.97

ⁱⁱ Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio. “ With Glad Hearts” released for this pandemic and used by permission.
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