

Date: April 4, 2021 (Easter Sunday)

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Title: THE MOST REMARKABLE STORY IN HISTORY

Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the greatest event in human history! I hope you're ready to celebrate. Ironically, on that first Easter Sunday morning, the women came to Jesus' tomb expecting not to celebrate. They expected nothing but death, grief, and painful memories. The surprise they experienced that morning changed their lives, and the course of human history.

What would you do if you went to a tomb and the dead person stepped out to greet you? I don't know about you, but I would be afraid and confused. We know how to prepare for death. We know how to respond to it. But how do you prepare for the Resurrection? How do you prepare to meet the risen Lord?

The time was Sunday morning just before dawn. The setting was a garden, not too far from the place, where Jesus had been crucified. In the garden was a tomb, freshly hewn from rock. A giant stone that once sealed the burial chamber, had been rolled away. Some grief-stricken women made their way to that lonely spot.

The woman John's Gospel identifies is Mary Magdalene. Among the names included in the other Gospels are Mary, the mother of James, Joanna and (Saw luh mei) Salome. Undoubtedly the silence of the night and the solemnness of the occasion caused them to move quietly toward the place where their Lord's body had been laid. They brought spices with which to anoint him.

It must have been disconcerting, and perhaps frightening, to discover the stone had already been rolled away from the tomb, and the tomb was empty. Jesus wasn't there. What did it mean? Had Jesus' final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Did Jesus' enemies fear and despise him so much, that they had seized Jesus broken body?

The women quickly scattered to tell their families and friends of this disturbing event. Mary rushed to inform Peter and John. They hurried back to the tomb with her, but they too, were mystified. They returned to the safety and seclusion of their homes. Mary was now alone with her grief. She stood weeping quietly, just outside the tomb.

In vain desperation she stooped and allowed herself one last look inside the burial vault. Imagine her dismay when she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." As she said this, she was suddenly conscious of a man standing near her. He said to her, "Woman, why are weeping? Whom do you seek?" Mary supposed that this was the gardener. She said with deep anguish in her voice, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, that I may reclaim his body."

As she said this, the stranger softly called her name, "Mary." Whether the sun was just beginning to peep over some nearby Judean hillside at this precise moment we don't know. Tear swollen eyes combined with pre-dawn darkness could explain Mary's failure to recognize Jesus immediately.

But, when he called her name, there was a sunrise in Mary's heart. "Rab-boni!" she answered in Hebrew, which means "teacher." With a sudden surge of emotion, she sought to embrace him. It was the natural response of a deep and grateful love. It was Jesus who had made a new woman of Mary Magdalene. Tradition has painted Mary Magdalene to be a woman of the streets. Whether that's true is a matter of speculation. We do know, Jesus drove seven unclean spirits from her, but we have no scriptural evidence that the seven spirits had an effect on Mary Magdalene's morals.

But, what was not a matter of speculation, was Mary's devotion to this humble rabbi. Impulsively she reached for him, but Jesus stopped her with the explanation that he hadn't yet ascended to the Father. Mary Magdalene will have to be content to hold Jesus in her heart. That's exactly what she did. Later she would testify to his disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

What does Mary Magdalene's experience on that first Easter Sunday have to do with your life and mine? Are there empty tombs in our lives, into which we may be seeing and feeling, a sense of helplessness and despair? Like, the loss of a loved one or a new health issue! It's a relevant question: is there a sense in which each of us can also come through a crisis of doubt and uncertainty and be able to proclaim victoriously, "I have seen the Lord."

First, we should note the sense of hopelessness that enshrouded all those who followed Jesus after his crucifixion. If actions speak louder than words, those first disciples made it abundantly clear, they no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world. Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship for us. But, we can't appreciate the Easter message, if we can't understand, that the first Easter was born, in total darkness.

His disciples had believed that Jesus was the Messiah who had come to deliver Israel, but now Jesus lay in a borrowed grave, his side with a deep gash from a spear, his hands and feet disfigured with the nail marks, his brow a tangled mess of hair and blood where the crown of thorns mocked his supposed kingship, his back a terrifying gridwork of open wounds from the 39 lashes. Jesus hung on the cross naked, while soldiers belittled him and spat upon him. Jesus' followers cowered now behind closed doors, their emotions a mixture of cynicism and despair. Perhaps you have been there. Maybe you live or have lived behind closed doors. Many good people have. Grief, fear, hopelessness cause us to retreat. We don't want to face the world.

The two nights following Jesus' crucifixion, were the longest nights for those who loved Jesus. Perhaps you have gone through your own long night. The words of a doctor, "I'm sorry, it's malignant. There's nothing we can do." A phone call in the night, "Mrs. Jones, there's been an accident. Could you come to the hospital?" The words of your accountant, "Bill, if you sell your assets now, you might be able to recoup part of your investment. Otherwise you stand to lose everything." A parent to a young child: "You know, dear, Mommy and Daddy have not been getting along lately. We have decided to try living apart for a while." Many of you have had your own dark night. Easter was not born in the brightness of day. The women came to the tomb while it was still dark.

But listen. **We need to know, that help is closer than we think.** The darkness of the moment, and our tear swollen eyes, may blind us to a friend, who's standing quietly in the shadows, nearby. Softly, he asks, "Woman, why are you weeping? Why are you in such despair?" After listening to our complaint, he whispers our name, Bob, Mary, Jack, John, Lorrie, and we recognize, that he's been there all the time. He's not dead, he's alive! Christ is alive and because he's alive, we discover that the sun rises again, and birds sing, and joy begins to creep back into our life. Help and hope are closer than we think.

A few of you may remember the name Leo Ryan. Ryan was a California State Assembly member back in the 1960s and '70s. State Assembly members sought to create laws that were just, and Ryan took that responsibility very seriously. In 1965, when racial conflicts boiled up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, Ryan didn't just study the situation. He moved in with a Black family in Watts. He lived with them for two weeks and worked as a substitute teacher at the local high school so he could understand the needs of the community.

In 1970, Leo Ryan was named chair of the state's commission to reform prisons. In order to understand the actual conditions inside the prisons, Leo Ryan asked to be admitted to Folsom State Prison, at the time one of the worst maximum-security prisons in the state. He was arrested, strip-searched, had his mug shot taken. He was confined to a prison cell. Ryan spent a week in Folsom, living like a prisoner so that he could understand how to create a more humane prison system. He gave up his own freedom and dignity and rights to ensure a better future for others.

In his short political career, Leo Ryan dedicated himself to issues of social justice and compassion for those who didn't have a voice in society. Sadly, he was assassinated in 1978 while trying to reach members of Jim Jones' Jonestown cult in Guyana. Ryan had gone there to ensure that Jones' followers weren't being brainwashed or threatened or held against their will in this isolated compound.

As one of his closest friends said of him, "He would march into the heart of hell to see it firsthand."

"He would march into the heart of hell . . ." I know someone else who was willing to march into hell to rescue those he came to save, one who was willing to give up his own power and divinity to walk in our shoes, one who gave up his life on the cross to save us from the power of death. Easter reminds us that Jesus came to save us. Help and hope are closer than we think.

The poet wrote that "hope springs eternal." And it does! Hope is another way in which God whispers our name. As long as you believe that there's an answer, an answer will be found. I can't recall any appearance of the risen Christ, to an unbeliever. Your greatest ally in the long, dark night of the soul, is your faith and your hope. Jesus says, "I am here, I will never forsake you."

This brings us to the final thing we need to say on this Easter Sunday morning. **The victory of Easter is a gift available to anyone who will receive it.** The New Testament was not written by Greeks, who believed in the immortality of the soul. It was written by Jews who believed, that when a person dies, he or she really dies. But

because of their experience with the risen Christ, these first Christians knew that a gracious, loving God grants life, eternal life, to all who will receive it. As Christ was resurrected from the grave, so may you and I experience new life through him. That's the gift Jesus longs to give each of us. It's the opportunity to experience victorious living here and now.

Comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert was just 10 years old when his father and two teenage brothers died in tragic plane crash. Colbert credits his mother's faith and resilience with helping him cope with his grief. He says his mother's example of coping with her own grief kept him from giving in to bitterness.

But for many years, Colbert turned his back on his faith. After graduating college, he considered himself an atheist. But one day, while walking down the street in Chicago, Illinois, a stranger handed Colbert a small book containing the New Testament and Psalms. Inside the front cover was a list of verses to read if you were in need of help. Colbert flipped to the verses on anxiety. As he read these verses, he says, ". . . for the first time, I understood the real meaning of the phrase, 'It spoke to me.'" He stood on that street corner in the cold and read the words contained in that book, and, he says, "My life has never been the same."

The most remarkable story in all of history, is the change that took place in the lives of those early Christians, after their encounter with the risen Christ. They became absolutely fearless and unstoppable. And why not? Those early disciples knew that Christ had conquered death. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of confidence in the power and purpose of God? You can! It's God's free gift, to all who will receive it.

Are you looking anxiously into an empty tomb? Don't give up. There's a Friend closer than you think. Jesus is calling your name. Jesus is offering you a gift, it's the gift of abundant and eternal life. And it's available to all who will receive it. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.