

**Sermon - Easter Day 2024**  
**3/31/24**  
**John 20:1-18**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

For the apostles of Jesus, the first Easter morning begins in crisis. There is a tomb – that final, authoritative sign of the death of the Messiah they have loved - and the tomb is empty. After Mary Magdalene reports that the stone that had sealed the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away, Peter and the apostle John come running. The stone is gone. They stoop to peer inside. The discarded linens of burial rest upon the barren stone, and the *tomb is empty*. Crisis. Perhaps an addition of insult to injury. Jesus Christ has been crucified and has died and now, it seems, even his body has been forbidden this final, tender peace.

The Gospel tells us that when Peter and John encounter this early Easter crisis, “the disciples returned to their homes.” We don’t know if they were wracked with anger or confusion or grief - perhaps some devastating constellation of all three. But in the face of this additional heartbreak, they return home. They attempt to go about their business. Theirs is the embodiment of “keep calm and carry on,” some half-stumbling effort at pretending that in the midst of catastrophe, somehow, some way, something of life must continue on.

Mary Magdalene finds herself in the midst of crisis too. She does not leave – she cannot leave– as if to go would be to admit that the next day would have to come without the One whom she has loved. Mary Magdalene *weeps*. The followers of Jesus saw a tomb that was empty, and they believed the future to be empty too.

And so it is for all of us. No matter who we are or where we have come from, all of us – at one time or another – will move through seasons where we find that this human life appears to

be nothing more than passage through a graveyard marked by tombs that we cannot understand. Whether the tombs we walk among are empty or occupied, there will be a time when death seems to be the final word.

Sometimes the tombs are found in the midst of our circumstances. Our lives progress, and we find that more and more of the doors we had hoped to walk through have been boarded up or lost all together. Jobs are lost. Relationships break down. Illness comes. We peer into the graves of our days and weeks and years, and we find only darkness – empty and bitter.

Sometimes the tombs are within us – in our very own souls. We pretend that all is well, but O, how we know the broken places we work in desperate fever to cover in stone. Our old, embarrassing wounds. Our anger. Our addictions. Our hard-heartedness. The things that we lie about when other people ask how we are doing. Tombs full of our own darkness – stale and decayed.

Sometimes the tombs are surrounding us from the ache of the world outside. The scourges of war and poverty. The torment of racism and discrimination. Grave upon grave of all of the beauty that the sin of the world has killed. The stunning absence of dignity and of joy.

We all walk among the tombs. Sometimes we are Peter and John – we encounter the magnitude of confusion and sorrow, and we *run*. It is too much - all of it - and we run home and pray to move forward, or to forget, or, honestly, to die enough ourselves to not feel the full terror of what we have known.... Sometimes we are Mary. And all we can do is weep. We see a tomb that is empty, and we believe the future to be empty too.

**But this has never been the destiny of the children of God. It is not our destiny today.**

We begin the story in the dark, but then the fullness of Easter is brought out into the light. In the midst of her weeping, Mary pauses. *Someone has come into the garden.* “Sir,” she says to the stranger, “if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” **It is a plea from the graveyard of her own heart.** *Please, sir, if I can no longer love, at least let me bury him.*

**But then Jesus speaks Mary’s name.**

I don’t know if Mary ever thought that there was ever anything extraordinary about her name, but here – on the lips of her Savior – her name crosses the sea of crisis. Her simple, lovely name rings out from the beginnings of creation in another garden, in another time, across her grief, and her doubt, and all of her pain. “*Mary,*” Jesus calls. And she recognizes him, close and gentle and vibrantly alive.

The tomb isn’t empty because someone has stolen something. It isn’t empty because someone has lied. It is empty because Jesus Christ – the Son of the Living God, the Messiah, our Sacrament and King – **has risen from the dead.** He has conquered death itself. He has stretched his arms of love over every tomb in the graveyard of human failure and called us to come out and breathe and sing and live.

We know that our years in this world can still feel to us like death. We know that sin still grips us, even sometimes against our holiest efforts. **But remember** that there was an hour, early on Easter morning, when Mary and Peter and John all believed that death had had the final word. They all believed in their bones that sin and darkness had won – they believed, profoundly, that grief and injury were all that was left to them. *They believed this – and it was not true.*

So, at times, we find ourselves in that early hour. We believe that illness or sin will be our defeat. We run away with Peter and John. We weep inconsolably with Mary. We believe that these shadows are all that wait for us.

But today, **Jesus calls our name**. Today he extends his hand to us and promises that even if we do not yet know it, even if we don't quite understand it or even feel it, his Resurrection is true... *and it is for us*.

This Easter day is not just Sunday, March 31st, 2024. This Easter day is forever. It is the eternal assurance of Almighty God that neither "death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Today we revel in those electric seconds of the breath that came from the lips of Jesus the microsecond after he called a single name into the world.

**Today Jesus calls your name.** He meets you in the garden, at the threshold of every tomb, even the one you thought would be your prison forever. He is Risen. He is vibrant and alive. He walks among our graveyards, meeting us with freedom and with blessing.

Today, in this hour, we sing with Mary, and Peter, and John – with everyone who has ever listened closely for salvation in the quiet dark:

*I know that my Redeemer liveth,  
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;  
and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God;  
whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold,  
and not as a stranger.*

