

Easter – Let Us Begin
United Church of Broomfield
April 4, 2021

John 20:1-18 NRSV

20 ¹Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Can you imagine just how emotion packed that walk to the grave must have been? How heavy those spices were? How it was a struggle to take each and every step to the tomb? Yet, the women were focused and felt they had to do this for the Lord. They had to pay their respects and prepare him properly for his resting place.

I imagine this was about the only thing they were thinking of the day prior. Due to the laws of the Sabbath, they would not have been able to do this work then. In the midst of profound grief, there’s this odd sense of “taking care of business,” that kind of takes over. To stave off the pain and anguish of not just death, but such a cruel and gruesome murder of someone you love, focusing on the minutiae of busy-work sets in.

So, before the sun had even risen, they dutifully made their way on that Sunday. And sometime right around when they made their way, wouldn’t you know it, another earthquake took place. The second in three days. What in the world was going on? If that weren’t concerning enough, when they had made their way to the grave, the stone had been removed from the entrance!

Although we see from the other accounts that it was a number of women who went to do this, John chooses to focus solely on Mary Magdalene. Upon seeing the stone removed, it appears that she almost immediately sprints to go get Peter and John to let them know what had happened, even though she didn’t yet realize what

had happened. In her mind, this had probably been a grave robbery. Add the possibility of robbery or desecration atop one's already raw emotion of grief. It must have been a horrible moment for Mary.

Let's take a step back for a moment and understand the relationship Mary had with Jesus. Although she was obviously in his "inner circle" of friends by this point, it had not always been that way. In fact, the first time Jesus probably met Mary, she was in bad ways. For she was a woman who had been possessed by seven demons. And the Lord took compassion on her and drove those demons out. Just think about what that would have done for Mary. This was a woman who had no control over her body or her life. It belonged to Satan's minions. And in a brief moment, that all changed. Jesus had given back to her, the ability to move and speak as she wished. She owed everything she was and had to Jesus. With his crucifixion, that had all been taken away from her.

Once again, she found herself powerless. She had to sit and watch and cry as she saw Jesus, her best friend in the entire world, beaten to a pulp, tortured and dying on a cross. She had to witness the blood and water flowing from his side as the soldier made sure his death was finalized. And now she couldn't even pay her respects to her friend. She couldn't even prepare him for burial because someone had taken the body. Who could be so evil to do such a thing? With him out of the picture, would those demons come back? What would stop them? Who would protect her now? What did the future hold...for her...for all of them?

After she had spoken with Peter and John and watched them run to the grave, she herself finally made her own way back. And just like last time, that stone was still off to the side. So, she sat there and cried. Eventually though, she got up the courage to actually look inside the tomb. Still though, no Jesus. Just his grave clothes neatly folded....And two angels. According to John, she doesn't seem to be shocked or thrown at the seemingly unexplainable or mystical appearance of two angels. Mary does react with shock or wonder at their presence. She doesn't question why they're there or what they're doing, "just hanging around."

Those angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She probably thought to herself, "why do you think I'm crying! My best friend is dead and now someone stole his body! Have you never lost someone you love? How could you ask such a question?"

Grieving, frustrated and upset, she either doesn't have time or a desire to engage these angels and their inane questions, so Mary then turned around and someone else is standing there. Not some angel. But a man. And he asked her the same exact question: "Woman, why are you crying?"

She assumed that he was a gardener and thusly had to be the one that had moved Jesus' body. Although it would be a tough task to move him by herself, she asks, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

But then with one simply word, her life again changed. As quickly and as impactful as when she had the demons driven out of her, so once again she had been given power.

"Mary."

And that's all it took. This was no gardener, stranger or grave robber. This was her Jesus. He had done it, just as he said. He rose from the dead! He was actually alive and standing before her. I have to imagine that

emotions just spilled out of her again. She probably cried as she said, “Rabboni,” but these were tears of happiness now...not tears of sadness and despair. All had been made right in the world. And she would never, ever let Jesus depart from her again.

Well, at least until Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Wait, what? Isn't this the day of triumph? The day we've been waiting for – the final victory? Isn't this the day Jesus wants all people, Mary included, to shout, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!?” Why would Jesus say, do not hold on to me?

Well, because it's just the beginning.

Let me ask, “Did you wake up happy today?” Yeah, I'm guessing you probably did. One, this is Easter, this is what it's all about for us Christians. The greatest single day of the year. The affirmation and celebration of the “death of Death,” – **eternal life is outs**. And on top of what this means for us in our spiritual lives, there's all other sorts of good things that may be happening. In spite of a pandemic, families will have Easter Egg Hunts at home. There will be Easter baskets with candy, chocolates, dyed eggs and other goodies. There will be baptisms and celebrating birth, life and the joining of a precious little one into the universal community of God's creation. Thankfully because of the vaccine, some families and friends will be able to finally, and safely, gather for Easter dinner.

Yet, as great as this day is, it's not perfect. There's still the reality of a tortuous crucifixion that did happen. There's still sin and the effects of sin. Death may have been defeated, but sin wasn't. I woke up this morning, just like any other, and had to put on my glasses so I could actually see what I was doing. Many of us had those aches and pains that we never used to have before. Even though it's Easter, our bodies were tired and tried to get us to roll back into bed for some more sleep. We may end up fighting with the family or saying something we shouldn't. Even though it's Easter, we will sin today in some way. We'll also deal with the effects of sin since we still have those sinful, earthly bodies. They're not of the heavenly kind yet.

And then what about tomorrow? And the next day? Then the next week? Racism will still be happening...as will hunger, homelessness, global warming and oppression. Are we still going to be as happy about the Resurrection? Probably not. Even though it will be just as true then as it is now, our joy won't be as great. And what about our sin? Yeah, that'll still be there.

So, as Jesus explained to Mary, don't hold on to me...yet. Don't hold on to today.

YES! Treasure the truths of Easter. The truth that we can share a table and a meal with someone who will betray their commitments and their community. The truth that in the crucifixion and resurrection the power of love and service to the greater good will overcome the powers of domination and personal gain.

Treasure the fact that Jesus' resurrection is proof of victory. That it shows that Jesus' death allows us eternal life and joy with God. Treasure the truth that Jesus' death and resurrection defeated death for all. But understand that something even better is waiting for you. Like Mary, understand that it's just the beginning.

Because, it's not just Jesus who has risen from the dead. We all will someday too. In fact, at this very moment, Jesus is getting ready for us to do just that. Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father.” You know what Jesus is doing right now? It's not like he's on a break. He's not in his retirement period. Jesus is seated at the right hand of our loving Creator. Along with the Holy Spirit, they are working for

us and within us, each and every moment of every day, helping us to be as close as possible with God so that we can navigate this earthly life – enjoy the good moments and endure the bad ones. Jesus continues to teach, exemplify and guide us in holy Easter living so that we can experience the heavenly existence intended for us all, on earth and in heaven.

That is why we proclaim with elation, “He is risen, he is risen, indeed!”

Mary Magdalene understood just how precious Jesus was to her. She knew that she stood powerless and was worth nothing without him. And after seeing that it was actually him talking to her on that Easter Sunday, and not just a gardener, she wished to hold on to him forever.

Yet, he was not ready for her to do so...yet. While some see Jesus’ victory over death as an “ending,” it is in fact just the beginning; for Jesus and us. Jesus works in us to create the Heaven God has always intended. Easter is yet another opportunity for us to celebrate and begin – begin to do the work that is required to create Heaven – a place, a realm, a reality of love, compassion, unity, community, peace and joy.

He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Let us celebrate ... and let us begin.

AMEN.