

“Two Stories”

John 20:1-10

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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’s head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Literary scholars say that there are only seven stories in the world. All the books, all the novels, all the songs, poems, folk and fairy tales, there are only seven stories between them: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage & Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Every story you’ve ever heard and every story you’ve ever told fits in one of those seven plot categories. There are only seven stories and infinite variations of them. That’s what the experts say.

But I say there are only two stories, really. Only two stories, and infinite variations of them. There’s the story of the Fall and the story of Redemption. There’s the story of the crucifixion and the story of the resurrection. The story of Good Friday and the story of Easter Sunday. There is the story of how humans are destroying creation and there is the story of how God is redeeming it. There is the story told by the powers and principalities that are passing away, and the story of the eternal Kingdom of God. There are only two stories.

And we become the one we believe.

The Nigerian Poet and novelist Ben Okri puts it this way, “One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way. We are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live the stories that either give our lives meaning, or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change

the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.” Easter is the day we finally understand that God has changed our story.

When Mary Magdalene got up early on the first day of the week, when she went out to the tomb where they had laid the broken, mutilated body. When she walked there while it was still dark, there was only one story she could believe in. It was the only story she’d ever known. The story of the crucifixion. The story of the fallen world. The story of “the way things are,” when the powerful do what they want because might makes right. The story that says all you are is what you have, your whole worth is what you own, and you better protect it at all costs. You better look out for number one because no one else will.

For a moment, a season, she had dared to believe there might be another way. When Jesus of Nazareth came into her life, for a moment she had hoped there was another way. A way of abundance, a way of forgiveness, a way of new life. She wasn’t like his other disciples, she didn’t run away from his agony. She didn’t abandon him after his arrest. She didn’t look away as he was tortured and shamed. She stayed with him until his last breath. She stayed because she loved him. And maybe she stayed because she still hoped.

Until the last moment, she still hoped that the one who calmed the storm and cast out demons and raised the dead might have one last great triumph. But she saw him die. She saw his lifeless broken body wrapped in linen cloths and taken away.

So, much as she wanted to believe in his way, his story, she knew there was only one story. In the end mercy is weakness and the weak are fools and there is no other way.

Like many of us, she loved him and his stories, she just knew there was no place for them in this world. Still, she loved him and so she rose early on the third day and she walked to the tomb to honor him. The one who said he came from God. The one who proclaimed that there was another way and that he was that way. She went to mourn the death of his story.

Mary walked to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, bitterly resigned to living the other story we all know so well. It’s the story of Derrek Chavin’s knee on George Floyd’s neck. It’s the story of refugees turned away at the border. It’s the story of poor children starving and dying of preventable diseases while the rich throw birthday parties for their dogs. It’s the story of death, destruction, and despair. It’s the winner-take-all story of our world. Mary walked to the tomb while it was still dark and that was the only story she knew. She couldn’t change it, but she walked to the tomb to grieve it.

When all you know is the story of the crucifixion, when all you know is the story of Good Friday, when all you know is that no matter how brutal and evil the powers that be are, there is no getting around them, when all you know is that story, then what you believe is this: In the end, sooner or later, everything beautiful, everything kind, everything good will be crushed. And your only choice is to harden your heart

and conform to the story or be crushed by it. It's only a matter of time. There are only two choices. You can live in that Good Friday story or you can die in it.

She walked to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark and there was only one story. And after what she'd seen on Friday, she knew there would only ever be that one story. Because if the one who walked on water, calmed the storm, and multiplied loaves and fishes; if the one with the power to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cure the lame, and raise the dead, if he couldn't survive, if he couldn't change the way things were, then no one ever could. If evil and violence and injustice could destroy him, then those powers would eventually crush us all. All you can do is hide and cry and hold on as long as you can.

When she got there, she could see into the tomb. The stone that sealed the entrance had been moved. And she knew exactly what had happened. It wasn't enough for the ones who hated him to kill him. They'd come back for his body. They'd taken his corpse to mutilate it and disgrace him further.

Burial practices were very sacred to the Jewish people. The Talmud said it was better to be a stillborn baby than a man who didn't receive proper burial. So when Mary got to the tomb and the body was gone, she knew what happened. Because she knew the story. They'd taken his body, for no good reason other than they knew it would cause even more pain and shame. For those who live and believe in the Good Friday story, the desire to cause pain is insatiable.

So Mary ran back to the other disciples to share the terrible news, and Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, ran to see. They raced to see the empty tomb, the final wound.

And the beloved disciple got there first, but couldn't bear to go in. And Peter, bless him, when he caught up, couldn't bear not to. But all he saw when he went inside were the linen strips Joseph of Arametha used to wrap Jesus's bloodied body and the grave cloth they'd placed over his face. Peter saw the burial clothes lying there. And nothing else.

But the beloved disciple, who came in behind him, saw those same strips of linen and grave cloth. And in that moment, he saw a whole new story. In that same space, in those same items, he saw a new holy story.

The beloved disciple saw holy vindication, saw life triumphing over death, forgiveness over sin, love over hate. The one who loved Jesus saw that Jesus was not in the tomb, not because he'd been taken, but because he'd been risen, just like he said.

And if Jesus's death on the cross on Good Friday—if that had (gloriously, impossibly) *not* been the end of him, then that means Good Friday is not the only story after all. If what Jesus endured had not destroyed him, if the betrayal and abandonment and false charges and unjust trial and false condemnation and torture and scorn and shame and humiliation and beatings and the crucifixion and Death itself, if none of that had the power to stop his life ...

And if it did not have the power to change him (and it didn't, we who kept watch

with him on Good Friday, we who heard his seven last words, we who kept watch to the end, we saw that through it all Jesus was love; Jesus was forgiveness; Jesus was mercy; Jesus used his power not to destroy but to endure. Jesus used his power, not to cause suffering, but to bear it in love and transform it into a manifestation of his glory). . .

If all of that evil didn't end or altar Jesus's story, but became part of it, *then that changes everything.*

This changes everything.

This is a new story.

In the empty tomb, in those grave cloths laid aside, the beloved disciple, the one who Jesus loved, the one who loved Jesus, he saw that everything Jesus said was true. He saw that everything Jesus *was* is true. Jesus is truth. And the way into life and new story.

And so, in the empty tomb we see, there is another story. There is another, eternal indestructible Kingdom where all are welcomed and none are coerced; where those hungry for food and those hungry for justice are filled; where the poor and the poor in spirit are blessed; where those who weep are comforted; where the meek inherit the whole earth; and where the children of God are peacemakers—reconciling and blessing, transforming their enemies, for love's sake.

In that empty tomb, in those cloths laid aside, the beloved disciple saw that there is a life which swallows up death. There is a power in forgiveness that breaks the bondage of sin. And there is a freedom of Spirit that comes from God and can never be incarcerated or executed.

In the empty tomb, the beloved disciple saw that we now belong to that holy Kingdom with its holy story. The kingdom of the second story. And from now on, the very worst things that happen to us do not have the power to overcome us or define us. And those who put their trust in the God of all creation will never be forsaken.

The beloved disciple looked into that empty space, where the burial cloths had been cast aside and saw: there is another story, a better story, a second story. He saw that, and he believed.

Beloved ones, we become the story we believe. Not the stories we know, or the stories we live, or even the story we prefer. We become the story we believe.

And there are only two stories. Here on this side of eternity, we will always know both of them. We will always live both of them. The story of Good Friday and the story of Easter Sunday. The story of the beautiful and good suffering on the cross, and the story of wild new life unleashed on the world when they pierced his side. The story of his life blood that can not be stopped by death, that cannot be imprisoned in the tomb, flowing into us and all creation, transfusing his life, his grace, his way, his resurrection power, his story—into us, into all who believe.

We will always know both stories. And we will always live both stories.

Here in the time between the first and second coming of the Lord, when the Kingdom has come but has not been fully established, when the powers and principalities of evil are passing away but not without a vicious fight, we will always know both stories and live in both stories. Here and now, both stories are true.

But we have the power to choose which story we believe in. We can choose to believe in the story of Good Friday, which says that power is righteousness. Or we can choose to believe in the story of Easter Sunday (which is also the story of Good Friday—if only we have eyes to see) which says righteousness is power.

The beloved disciple looked into the empty tomb.

He saw that Jesus had risen, just as he said.

And he believed a new story.

I'm glad you are here on Easter. I'm glad you hear the Easter story. But the invitation this morning is to hear and believe. Because we become the story we believe.

And you may say, as a desperate father said to Jesus in the gospel of Mark, "I believe, help my unbelief." And, Good news! That is enough. If you want to believe, you believe. And Jesus does help us in our unbelief. Your mustard seed faith will grow into a wild and living tree of faith.

Jesus understands that it is hard to believe in his Kingdom, when we live in the midst of destruction and death, when all that is around us testifies to the brutal power of the enemy. That is why, on the night before he went out to battle the enemy of our souls, he sat down at table with his disciples and took bread and gave thanks to God and gave it to them saying, this is my body, which is broken for you. And in the same way took the cup and said, this is my blood, which will be shed. And with it I make a new covenant with you, between God and the holy whole of creation: My bloodshed is not for condemnation, but for forgiveness of sins. He said, here is my story. Eat and drink and believe.

He said to those around that table, and to all of us here and now, all of us who believe and struggle against unbelief, he said: take this bread, drink from this cup. My body, my blood, my Spirit, my story within you, until the day I come again.

The other story of power and destruction and despair may be all around us, but his story, his life are within us. Through this bread and this cup, he is in us and we are in him and nothing, nothing, NOTHING can separate us from his love and remove us from his story. Alleluia! Amen!