

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

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On Good Friday afternoon, while our congregation gathered in this sanctuary to behold Mozart's *Requiem*, across the Atlantic Ocean in northern England, bands of pilgrims walked with their crosses for an eighth and final day to their destination on Holy Island. Yesterday, on Holy Saturday, a group of women in Bosnia put the finishing touches on hand-painted Easter Eggs. Photographs show entire rooms full of their intricate creations, eggs awaiting hands eager to roll them or crack them to mimic the tomb's opening. As *Saturday* gave way to evening, thousands gathered in Jerusalem at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, whose cornerstone plaque, if she had one, would read 326 A.D. For hours they jostled with one another for a turn to pray before Jesus' tomb. Whether it was in Jerusalem, Bosnia, Holy Island, or right here in Baltimore at our sunrise service, when the minister proclaims, "Christ is Risen," the faithful respond, "Alleluia." Then they take the light from the Easter fire, sharing it candle by candle across the congregation. We, in the brightness of this Easter mid-morning, add to the candles more fanfare: trumpets, flowers, and our own Alleluias. We all are rejoicing in the same glory: nothing can defeat God's wondrous life.

The gospel of John was written in hopes that we might see God's glory. The brightness shines as the Word becomes flesh, and the man who is God turns water into wine, heals those who suffer, and makes meals for multitudes. Even his death is called part of his glory, an unexpected path toward God for those who believe. Have you seen the glory? Has it made its way to you through a tender touch, a compassionate word, or the God who remembers your story?

On the first day of the week, while it is still dark, Mary Magdalene walks to a garden to visit a gravesite. The entrance is open, but the tomb is empty. For a moment, that is it. That is all of the glory.

Mary Magdalene isn't thinking about glory when she comes to the graveside. She is contending with earth-shattering loss. She had been among Jesus's followers since the day he had healed her. She had seen him teach, feed, and bring others into life. She did not flee when he was arrested, derided, and condemned. She stood at his cross while he died. She brings to the tomb amazing memories of love, laughter, acceptance, and life. And she carries with her nightmarish experiences of hatred, violence, pain, and death. When she arrives the tomb is empty.

So the first recorded announcement of Jesus' resurrection comes through the word *empty*. Empty is what the house is after the last child has left. Empty is the extra chair around the dining room no longer needed. Empty is what you are when you have given life all the energy, effort, and hope you have and still you come up lacking. Someone has stolen his body, she thinks. Someone has stolen his last shred of dignity.

Mary tells two other followers of this emptiness. Peter and the beloved disciple visit the gravesite, peering into the tomb. They notice, astonishingly, that it is not entirely empty. The linen cloths, with which Jesus's body had been wrapped, are still

there. One cloth was carefully folded, a sign of tenderness. So the first conclusion of emptiness shifts toward an alternate interpretation. Emptiness can be depletion. It can also be an unused canvas awaiting the artist's touch or the wide-open days on the calendar, awaiting fulfillment. Emptiness might describe the moments of silence before the necessary words can be spoken. The disciples look into the emptiness and see amid the grief, tiny hints of hope. They believe, even as they do not understand.

Peter and the beloved disciple return home. Sometimes when the order of the cosmos shifts beneath you, you retreat to a safe space to flip on the television, fold the laundry, or check your phone, pondering underneath these mindless tasks what might have just happened. Rarely does resurrection faith instantly burst forth in glory. Often it is the slow process of sensing the future has been changed by God's bottomless heart, God's self-emptying gift that pulls the world forward into life.

Mary stays weeping by the tomb. She has lost the Lord who changed her life, giving her hope, purpose, and freedom. She still believes someone has taken the body. She is so convinced her future is empty that she mistakes Jesus for the gardener.

Even as he calls her Mary, Jesus warns her: Do not hold onto me. It's such a strange instruction at such a joyous reunion. It goes against our instincts because when we find something that we have lost, we tend to hold on even more tightly. "Don't cling to me," says Jesus, because I am on my way to God. The glory is just beginning. The God whom death cannot defeat is not only my God, but also your God, not simply my Father but yours as well. The most glorious life you can have, not the easiest life nor the smoothest one, but the sturdiest, richest life possible, flows from God's heart. This is where Jesus lives; this is where you can live also.¹

The temptation on Easter morning is to promise all of that glory right now. It is Resurrection day, a preacher once said; today is the day to claim your new life.² Yet amid that truth is another one. The Resurrected Jesus is not received easily or quickly by his followers. At first the tomb was empty. Mary was weeping. And every disciple meets the Risen Christ in his or her own life, his or her complex, unique struggle to faithfully follow. Peter brings to the tomb the shame of his denial. Mary's tears hold memories of the crucifixion. That fact reassures us who celebrate Easter with both Alleluias and tears, with "Christ is Risen" as well as desperate prayers for those places within us still awaiting resurrection. Our lives are hidden deep in God's great life, protected by God's indestructible presence.³ "Don't hold onto me," says Jesus. I am still at work, still creating life for you, still leading you in the future, a future defined by God's love.

So here is the Resurrection invitation: peer into the tomb, face the deathliness. Notice, though, that someone with more power than you has rolled away the stone. See the care given to grave cloths left behind. Go home and think it over. Take time to weep, but keep pondering, watching, and listening until you hear Jesus call you by name.

Notes

1 Rowan Williams, "Letting Go," *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 111-119.

2 Gomes, Peter J., "Starting Over," in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 264.

3 Colossians 3:3-4.