

## A Quiet Reassurance

### John 20:1-18

Well, this is a different Easter experience! It's a little strange giving an Easter sermon by myself in an empty sanctuary, a place typically so full of energy on Easter Sunday. And I'm sure it's strange to listen to, or watch an Easter sermon by yourself. But we will have a full Easter celebration when we gather back together for corporate worship in the near future, and that is something we can look forward to.

So for *this* Easter, we have an opportunity to look at, and experience, the resurrection in a different way. No less meaningful, just deeply meaningful in a way that we may not ordinarily think of, or experience, in our typical Easter observances—you know, when there *isn't* a pandemic.

This self-isolation time has provided many opportunities for us to see ourselves and the world from a different perspective, and learn some new things—about ourselves, and the world. And that is true this Easter morning as well. And while this may feel a bit strange, there *is* a part of it that *is* appropriate and even right about it, both from my perspective as someone delivering a message by myself, and hopefully by the time we're finished, from *your* perspective at home by yourselves.

And so we come to a text that will help us with this. Our narrative from the apostle John might be a familiar one, but let's try to read it with new eyes, and a heart open to a fresh appreciation for the good news of Easter.

## **John 20:1-18**

**20** Early 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. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (John's way of referring to himself), and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed (not in the resurrection, but he believed Mary's story); <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and 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. <sup>13</sup>They 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.' <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus 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." ' <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene

went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

At Christmastime we sing a beloved carol, one of my favorites, O Little Town of Bethlehem. I don't mean to get that song stuck in your head today—please go and listen to or sing the Easter hymns in our order of worship! But the third verse of that Christmas carol is magnificent and insightful. It says: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so ("in the same way"—*silently*) God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." It's all about the silent night, right?

When we think about it, this is also true of Easter morning. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift of resurrection is given. The rest of the verse holds true as well. Including meek souls receiving him, like Mary Magdalene, when she recognizes the risen Christ.

This account from John's gospel, in telling of the first resurrection, speaks of it as a *quiet* encounter between the risen Christ and Mary. The first Easter morning was not all about large groups of people, with choirs of angels and loud singing and shouts of alleluia and a grand feast. It began in the dark, in quietness.

First with an empty tomb, then an understated appearance of angels who ask Mary a question, and then a life-changing, and world-changing, conversation between the risen Christ and Mary. In between, Peter and John engage in a footrace to and from the empty tomb, in a sort of comic relief type of competition between two of the disciples. I'm not going to spend time on that, or on them, except to say that commentators believe that these "I got there first" comments by John was his way of saying, "This is MY gospel, I'm writing it, so I get to say I won the race." It's silly, but it makes the bible and its writers very human, which I appreciate.

Anyway, Easter begins in the dark, in quiet. Instead of shouts of "Alleluia!" at dawn, there are thoughts of grave robbery, doubts and questions, and wondering about what this all means, and of course, the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary.

This Easter, in the quietness of *our* self-isolation, I want us to pay attention to the quietness of that first Easter Sunday. And the *emotion*. John gives us this account and tells the story in such a way that we are supposed to feel what Mary is feeling.

So, here is another scene to try to picture, and enter into fully, in your imagination. Let's take a step back and engage our senses as we try to put ourselves in the story: First, it's dark. John wants us to know that Mary came to the tomb before dawn, very early in the morning, while it was still dark.

Now, notice that Mary is by herself. Why did she go there, alone? We aren't told, but perhaps in her grief she just wants to visit the grave and sit close by, and grieve privately for her dear friend and teacher. We all need times like that when we are grieving the loss of someone dear to us. These are private moments of consolation and expressing our emotions, un-self-consciously, without others around.

So, what is Mary feeling on her way to the grave? What do *you* feel when you've lost a loved one? Especially if they died young, like Jesus did. What hopes did Mary have, that were crushed? What hopes have you had that were dashed when an unexpected, untimely death happened? Perhaps a literal death, or, a figurative death of something that never came to fruition. Can you walk with Mary for a moment in the pre-dawn darkness? A literal darkness, but also a metaphoric darkness of loss, and grief?

Then, following her realization that the stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was empty, there is a mixture of wonder and probably even deeper grief, as her first thought is that someone took Jesus' body away. That's the only reasonable explanation for an open grave and a missing body. Imagine how painful that would be.

And after Peter and John have come and gone—for some reason they didn't stay to help figure out what happened— now Mary really weeps. And her instinct is to look once again into the empty tomb. This time, to really look. We can assume the first time she simply glanced and saw that it was empty. Now she actually goes in. Maybe to find some measure of comfort, to go and sit where Jesus' body lay and grieve more fully and let it all hang out.

And she is questioned, twice, about her crying. First by the angels—and by the way I find it amazing that Mary isn't freaked out by these two sudden visitors dressed in white. It might be that they were more human-looking than our culturally conditioned images of angels suggest. Being dressed in white may not have been all that unusual either. Think of Roman togas. Or, maybe she is just so grief stricken that she doesn't realize she's talking with divine messengers.

But they, and then the risen Christ ask her the exact same question: “Why are you weeping?” This isn’t a critical question, or a scolding one, but a compassionate one: tell me about your tears; what’s going on underneath the liquid emotions? It’s a question that any of us would appreciate from someone who comes alongside us to console us. Talk to me about the tears. Heidi would say, this is a good chaplain question.

And Mary transparently shares her deep upset over the grave robbery. She wants to see the body. Like any of us would. In my years of pastoral ministry, especially in Alaska, I have spent time with grieving families where the body of a loved one was never recovered. It magnifies the grief. Just think of people today, right now, who are grieving the loss of a loved one who died from covid19 and they can’t physically visit or touch their loved one as a way of saying goodbye and letting go. It’s painful.

And into this pain, the risen Jesus appears. Mary thinks that Jesus is the gardener. Again, understandable. She isn’t expecting to see Jesus upright and talking to her. So she asks *him* if he has done something with the body, like she asked the angels.

And then, the great turning point in this encounter, the conversion experience if you will, takes place when Jesus utters one simple word: Mary. He speaks her name. He doesn't say, "Hey, it's me, Jesus; don't you recognize me? Don't you believe? Geez, the Scriptures said this would happen. I told you this would happen. Don't you recognize me??"

No, he says her name. Then and there, she recognizes him. There is something about our name being spoken that awakens us to a familiarity, an awareness of relationship, a connection beyond simple facial recognition, to heart-recognition. Think of a time when someone close to you said your name—not from three rooms across the house, loudly, in an effort to get you to do something, but looked you in the eye and spoke your name in a way that said, "I see you. I know you. Do you see me? Do you know me?" This is *the* significant moment for Mary, with Jesus. So...

**Now** what is Mary feeling?!? Do you feel the pendulum swing of emotion? Her response is a very human response: she wants to hold onto him. Who wouldn't want to, right?

And Jesus, her teacher, tells her not to cling too tightly, but gives her a little instruction and explains the bigger picture to her. He tells her that she is part of a larger drama and plan that will affect the destiny of the world.

This isn't just a reunion, end of story, and they lived happily ever after. The story has not concluded; in fact, it's still unfolding, Jesus says. And she must relate that to the disciples, and so Jesus sends her on a little mission trip, an evangelistic mission to go and announce the good news that Jesus has risen, and tell the other disciples about the larger plan that is unfolding.

And so, Mary became the first apostle. Or, as she has been called: the apostle to the apostles, in being the first to herald the news that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. John may have won the footrace with Peter to the empty tomb, but Mary was the one chosen and privileged to be the first to announce that Jesus Christ was risen, and that she had seen him.

In our social isolation right now I hope that we might be able to relate to Mary a little bit this morning. Easter is usually about festive celebrations and robust singing, pretty Easter dresses and fun Easter egg hunts, and a Sunday brunch or dinner that sometimes rivals Thanksgiving. But this year, I want us to remember that Easter began in the dark, in the quiet, in private moment, in a

personal encounter between the risen Christ and one of his beloved followers. A quiet reassurance, where Jesus looks someone in the eye and calls them by name. And, reveals a bigger picture and gives them a part to play in it.

Wherever you are this morning, you are probably either by yourself, or with one or two significant others. And this year, as much as any year, at Easter, remember that the risen Christ meets you in the quiet, perhaps in the dark (figuratively speaking, whatever darkness you might be experiencing), in the surprise and delight of a personal encounter, to call you by name, to give you hope, and reassure you that it's him that you are seeing. And maybe even give you a job to do, a little assignment, a mission, to share the good news.

While at home, I want you to imagine and believe the resurrected Christ meeting you there. Maybe go into *your* garden, if you have one, or some place that represents the empty tomb. Maybe set your alarm early one morning this week, before sunrise, and spend some time alone, in the quiet, in the dark, and ask Jesus to meet you there, and linger there to see how he does meet you. He might surprise you. We all have time; we can take a nap later in the day! Know that Jesus meets you, and calls you by name, and calls you to be part of his larger plan of renewal.

A final thought:

For there to be a resurrection, there first needs to be a death. That's the hard news that comes before the good news. And like Mary, each of us personally brings something with us to the empty tomb; a loss, a grief of some kind, a confession of something we need to offload, that the risen Christ can unburden from our heart. If you do get up and pray in the darkness and quiet, perhaps this is something you can bring with you to the empty tomb; and there receive the grace of comfort and personal reassurance.

But I've also been thinking: in this season of worldwide pandemic, we are living a death and resurrection motif, writ large. We grieve the loss of *human* life across the world, the deaths of people who are beloved to their families. And, at the same time there are other things passing away, at this time. For now, we don't know exactly what will pass and what will remain, after we emerge from this pandemic. There is a lot of speculation and educated guessing.

But somehow, in some way, God is renewing the world. I believe that. Resurrection is happening and will happen, but it necessarily includes, even *requires*, the death of some things. I'm not talking about big D death now, but the smaller d deaths of things that we and people around the world have known and

experienced for a long time as normal. And that might be painful, for a little while at least.

You know what, though? God is in the business of resurrection and renewal. And resurrection is pretty cool! We will all emerge from this, and the world will emerge from this, renewed and resurrected to new life.

And, think of all the ways that renewal is already happening, even during our time of social isolation. There are signs of resurrection everywhere. Like budding trees and emerging daffodils and tulips are signs of renewal and resurrection, there are signs of hope now, even as we simultaneously live through the struggle of what might feel like a tomb-like existence. So,

Here are some signs of life, signs of renewal and resurrection, and I'm sure you can add to this list; I'll just prime the pump for you this morning:

- People are getting out more, walking, gardening (the #1 new hobby), and generally slowing down. Slow is good for us humans. We live too much at speed in our culture.
- Another renewal-in-process is that carbon emissions and other pollution are so significantly reduced right now that people in China can see the sky and the stars at night for the first time in their lives. The canals in Venice

are clearer than they've been in decades. The list goes on in terms of environmental renewal.

- A sign of resurrection is that we're deepening our appreciation for the people—the teachers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, grocery store workers, garbage collectors, bus drivers, janitors, and more—who are the foundation of our society and keep us well in body and mind.
- A sign of life is that we're realizing that we *can* do things that seemed impossible and we *can* make sacrifices for the greater good. Maybe after learning how to come together to fight this virus, we'll carry that same spirit into the fight against racism, sexism, inequality, and climate change. We'll have to wait and see. I choose to be hopeful about that.
- Resurrection is taking place as we're all finding new ways to connect with ourselves, with our families, and our loved ones. We're realizing how important community is and we're doubling-down on investing in it. Including, learning how to use technology!
- Another renewal that is taking place is that we might be discovering the next Broadway stars from the comfort of our homes. Broadway legend Laura Benanti, empathetic to student performers who rehearsed for months for shows that are now canceled, invited student performers to

share their talents with the #SunshineSongs tag. Talent scouts are watching and discovering emerging artists, and the arts will be the better for it, and efforts like it.

- Along that line, we're discovering that our neighbors are low-key musical phenoms and we're getting free concerts, everywhere. Is it just me, or is it surprising how many talented musicians are hiding out in apartment buildings and houses? The videos from Europe of dozens of people out on their balconies listening to musicians and singing along warms our hearts.
- And finally, the dogs of the world are very, very happy. I don't know about cats. Some cats are probably very happy, and some probably think this is the worst thing that's ever happened to them and wonder why these humanoids aren't leaving every day like they used to, so the cats can pretend their run the place. But dogs... I've never seen so many happy dogs. And happy dog owners. Animals are part of the created order and they, too, are part of the renewal of all things, and our resurrected lives can rub off on them too. And the trees and plants.

You can add to this list. Look for signs of resurrection, signs of renewal.

And be part of God's renewal process—in your life, in your neighborhood, in the world. Amen, and alleluia!