

A Quiet Reassurance

John 20:1-18

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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. ²So 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.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards 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 (not in the resurrection, but he believed Mary's story); ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.' 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.

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 all the wonderful Easter songs! 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”—that is, *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 that verse holds true as well: No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of... fill in the blank here with your version of the mess that's going on in the world... Yet underneath all of that noise and commotion, in the silent places and quiet moments, meek souls receive him still—like Mary Magdalene, when she recognizes the risen Christ.

The account from John's gospel, in telling of the resurrection, speaks of it as a *quiet* encounter between the risen Christ and Mary. The first Easter morning

was not about large groups of people, or 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 were 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, there are doubts and questions and wondering about what this all means, and of course, the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary.

This Easter, I’d like to invite us to pay attention to the quietness of that first Easter Sunday. To take a break from the noise and commotion of the headlines and the anxiety that’s in the air these days, and walk with Mary for a moment on

that first Easter morning, and pay attention to the quietness of it. And the *emotion* of it. John tells the story in such a way that we are supposed to feel what Mary is feeling.

So, here is scene to try to picture and enter into fully, in your imagination. Let's take a moment 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. Perhaps Mary has a lantern with her, or some form of light to see her way to the tomb. Can you picture it?

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 a loss. 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 experienced a loss—of a loved one, or a loss of another kind? We've all experienced losses of some kind these past few years, personally and corporately & societally. There has been a lot of change! It's important to name those, and

grieve them so we can make room for new life and a new direction, personally and societally.

Then, following her realization that the stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was empty, there is a mixture of wonder and 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. My wife Heidi is a chaplain and she would say that this is a good chaplain question. So, these angels are being good chaplains in that moment.

And Mary transparently shares her deep upset over the grave robbery. She wants to see his body, and take care of him. Like anyone would. The absence of the body magnifies the grief. Just think of people who, during the height of the pandemic before we had a vaccine, grieved the loss of a loved one who died from covid19 and they couldn't physically visit or touch their loved one as a way of saying goodbye and letting go. It magnified the pain.

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 moment of awareness and clarity and comfort, takes place when Jesus utters one 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 simply 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, yelling, 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 consolation and explains the bigger picture to her. He tells her that she is part of a larger story and plan that will continue to unfold.

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, a 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 assigned to be the first to announce that Jesus Christ was risen, and that she had seen him.

In these turbulent and strange times in which we live, I hope that we might be able to walk with, and 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. And I sincerely hope we celebrate Easter in those ways; it *is* a day of celebration.

In addition to that this year, I also 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 the unfolding story of renewal.

And this year, as much as any year, at Easter, remember that the risen Christ meets *you* in the quiet times and places of *your* life, 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, in the end, everything is going to be alright. And maybe even give you a job to do, a little assignment, a mission, to share good news.

Amidst the clamor and noise of the newsy news, which bombards our senses daily, may we hear, beneath the noise and away from the distractions and shiny objects, in the quiet, the reassurance that the living God, in Christ, is with us, meeting us in any and every circumstance of our lives.

While at your home this week, wherever home is for you, try to imagine the living Jesus meeting you there. Maybe go into a garden somewhere, or a woods

or a park, 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. He likes to show up in disguise sometimes! Know that Jesus meets you, and calls you by name, and invites you to be part of his larger plan of renewal.

And speaking of renewal, one last thought:

Though we are bombarded with bad news on a regular basis, there is good news taking place all around us on a daily basis. We just don't hear it because it isn't on the menu of what we're offered. But the reality is, in the midst of transitions and turmoil, *God is renewing the world*. Through good people doing good things, every day, everywhere. I would be so bold as to say there is more good in the world than bad; we've just been trained to feed on the bad. So we need encounters with good, with Jesus in disguise, like Mary had. And if we re-train our eyes, and alter our menu of what we take in, we will begin to see that good all around us.

Because the risen Christ isn't found in the headlines, but usually on the side lines, under the radar, and in the ordinary and everyday.

There are signs of resurrection everywhere, if you look for them. Like budding trees and emerging daffodils and tulips are signs of spring renewal and the coming of summer, there are signs of hope all around us, even as we simultaneously live through the struggle of turmoil and transition. But we have to look for those signs of life; we have to find the good. So, here's an assignment from me...

In addition to looking for and listening for signs of life and renewal and good news around you from day to day, here are three web sites to feast your soul on (on screen, and insert). These are sites dedicated to uplifting stories and information. Many of us spend a lot of time online, so we may as well spend it on life-giving content that can help us re-train our eyes, re-wire our brains, begin to alter our diet of news, and nurture our souls. These are three that I subscribe to, and there are more like them.

You can find these through a simple search. And, you can subscribe to them and you'll receive regular communications. They cover a wide range of issues and stories; they are interactive, and you can contribute your own good news stories. And, they share helpful "Did you know?..." information.

For example...

Did you know...

That elephants are helping to reduce carbon in our atmosphere? In two ways: as they walk through forests, they eat some of the new growth trees and shrubs, thus helping the old growth trees grow bigger and taller as the forest is thinned out. And the bigger and taller trees get, the more carbon they absorb.

They are also helping reduce carbon by planting new forest in open spaces because... everyone poops! As they walk along they are planting seeds from the smaller trees that they were eating, thus creating new growth forests that will absorb carbon from the atmosphere.

Did you know... That in 2018 the LEGO company started using non-plastic, recyclable material to make their blocks? And their goal is by 2030 to have 100% of their blocks made with recycled water bottles.

These are just two good news stories out of hundreds that you can find on these sites, and in other places, as we look for them.

- The Good News Hub: [The Good News Hub - For Your Daily Dose Of Positive News](#)
- Good News Network: [Good News, Inspiring, Positive Stories - Good News Network](#)

- Happy Eco News: <https://happyeconews.com>

So, friends, go and find some good news, and perhaps encounter Jesus in disguise, to speak a word of assurance to you, *and* to bring you hope that renewal is happening all around us, and in the world. In your comings and goings, look for signs of resurrection, signs of renewal, right around you. And be part of God's renewal process—in your life, in your neighborhood, in the world. Amen, and alleluia!