

Yr. A, Easter Day
April 12, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1555 Words

Lessons: Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

Remember what happened on Friday. Mary Magdalene sat across from the tomb of Jesus—utterly discouraged, defeated, and hopeless. She had given everything—time, money, and most of all, courage. Mary stood by Jesus, not just to the end...but *after the end*. She watched Joseph of Arimathea roll that great stone across the entrance of the tomb.

So, the *one thing* Mary Magdalene *knew* when she woke up on Sunday morning was that she was powerless. She and the other women who prepared spices and ointments for Jesus' body *knew* his corpse was sealed behind a heavy stone and surrounded by armed guards.

We need to lean into this story, because Mary's story is also *our story*. It is tempting to feel powerless, when there are so many impediments and forces beyond our control. It is easy to feel discouraged, defeated, and even hopeless, like Mary did.

So, what did she do? She got out of bed and chose to do whatever she *could do*. Mary chose to get out of bed and give whatever gift she *could give*. Maybe she would have to leave the spices *beside the tomb*. Maybe the guards would be merciful enough to let Mary pour the ointment over that great stone, a little trace of evidence of her love for Jesus.

Our 2020 hindsight is as big and bright as the Montana sky. On Easter, we *know* to look for butterflies and Dogwood blossoms. We know to look for the signs of Easter life, because it's not our first Easter—even if it is our first Easter not *physically present* in a joyful congregation.

Dear people, it's hard not being physically together this Easter morning. Let's remember that Mary probably felt the same way. Let's remember that the *first Easter* was an even more profound test of faith for Jesus' followers. They did not have the 2020 hindsight that we have.

The men were locked away somewhere. To borrow a phrase, they were 'sheltering in place.' Please notice this: In the Gospel according to St. John, Mary did not show up in front of Peter with good news. She arrived with bad news. "The body of our beloved Jesus has been stolen," she cried. "We have no idea where he is." The first proclamation of Easter was utterly discouraging, defeating, and hopeless.

Simon Peter and the other beloved disciple could not bear the news. They mustered their courage and ran to the tomb. The only thing they knew is that they were powerless...and determined to do whatever they could do, and be the disciples Jesus had inspired them to be.

The Gospel according to St. John reports that Mary stood weeping at the tomb. She saw two angels, but could not recognize them as angels. She still believed the body of Jesus had been stolen. Then Mary turned and saw Jesus, but she could not recognize him as Jesus. She still believed his body had been stolen. Notice how the Gospel Story describes a nearly unrecognizable resurrection to a nearly powerless woman.

Mary discovered the joy of the resurrection because she was absolutely determined to do what she could do, to give what she could give, and to be the person Jesus had inspired her to be.

One of the things I love about Easter is seeing how the love of God transforms all the pain and suffering into freedom and peace. The love of God transforms all the discouragement, defeat, and hopelessness of the disciples into unimaginable joy. The love of God transforms the brutal death of Jesus Christ into eternal life for all.

Brother Curtis Almquist belongs to our Episcopal monastic order in Cambridge. He once taught me that “if you are suffering, you are being set up for joy.” I believe it is also true that if you feel discouraged, defeated, or hopeless, you are being set up for joy! Now, he did not mean that if you have had a lot of sorrow, happier days are just around the corner. He did not promise that every cloud has a silver lining. What he *meant* is that suffering, discouragement, defeat, and *even hopelessness* have the potential to put us in a position where we are more open to experiencing God’s loving transformation at work around us *and within us*.

Looking back at the first Easter, it is easy to see how the whole thing was a set up—the tomb, the stone, the guards. All the impediments and forces which seemed too powerful to overcome...they were all just a set up for Mary’s joy.

And the reason Mary was the first person blessed with the joy of the resurrection is because she persevered in her faith and determination. Feeling powerless, she kept doing what she *could do*. Feeling discouraged, she kept trying to give what she *could give*. Feeling hopeless, she kept *being the person* Jesus had inspired her to be.

So, St. Paul wrote to the Colossians (and to us), “*since* you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...set your minds on things that are above!” In other words, look up with faith. Lift up your hearts with hope. Extend forth your hands in love.

If you feel powerless, join the club—and then do what you are able to do; give what you are able to give; be the person Jesus has inspired you to be. This thing is a set-up! We are being set up like Mary to practice our faith in real, tangible ways. We are set up to spread visible signs of Easter life, signs of the love of God.

Mary could not even see the angels through her despair, but she kept the faith. She could not even see *Jesus* through her tears, but she kept seeking, kept asking, kept persevering, and it was all a setup for joy!

Now, I want you to think about this current crisis. Think about all the things you *cannot do*, because you are powerless. Think about all the impediments and forces beyond your control. Alright. Enough of that. Now think about what you *can do*. Think about what you *can give*. Think about who you *can be* as an inspired follower of the risen Christ.

Now think about it this way, depending upon your age: When you tell your children or grandchildren or nephews & nieces or friends about the pandemic of 2020, what story would you like *them to know* about what *you did...or gave...or became* for the glory of God and for the blessing of other people. Act out your own particular story of faith. Lean into your own particular story of love, like Mary did.

And then, when the time is right—maybe next week or maybe next year—share your story with them. They need to hear it, because they will have similar experiences of powerlessness, discouragement, defeat, and even hopelessness, and they will need *your* inspiring story to encourage them when that day comes.

I’ve witnessed a lot of faith stories in these past few weeks. In the interest of brevity, I will just mention a couple.

On Monday, a guy came to our office desperately searching for diapers. He was laid off. He, his wife, and their child were living in their car. Because of the leadership of our parish's children with the Lenten baby food and diaper drive and because of your generosity, we were able to give him a giant box of diapers and some other support, too.

He may have felt powerless when he came in, but before he left, he knelt down on our patio and helped a parishioner complete a repair he was working on. *Who does that?* Someone who has been set up to experience the joy of God's transforming love.

That same morning Danielle brought in the mail from the post office. I wish you could have seen the stack of envelopes you sent in with offerings. Quite a number of you also have set up automatic drafts. Others of you have pre-paid generous pledges in the midst of uncertainty. Thank you for making this parish's ministry and generosity possible.

Danielle walked back to my office with a card and a check. She knows that I don't want to look at our parishioners' checks—that is her area. But this card and check did not come from a member of St. Peter's. It came from a couple who are not members; they don't even live in Greenville. The card...was for our encouragement; the check was for \$10,000. *Who does that?* Someone who has been set up to experience the joy of God's transforming love.

I hope you will take to heart the encouraging words of St. Paul: "Since *you* have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...set your mind on things that are above."

If you feel powerless, you're not alone. Just do what you are able to do, give what you are able to give, dig deep—and become the person Jesus has inspired you to be.

It doesn't matter that you cannot see it clearly or understand it clearly...remember, the Gospel describes a nearly unrecognizable resurrection to a nearly powerless woman.

Well, *this* resurrection story...is also *our story*. And it is a set-up...a set-up for joy!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.