

**April 12, 2020**

**Sermon Manuscript**

John 20:1-19 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, 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>So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths 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 cloths lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <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 went back to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup>And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one 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>Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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 Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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 that he had said these things to her.

<sup>19</sup>On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Peace be with you! (John 20:1-19)

Well, I suspect for every one of us this is different from any Easter celebration we've ever experienced! And I hope and pray it is different from any Easter celebration we experience ever again! I mean, just think: If I had told you at this time last year that you would be watching St. Matthias' 2020 Easter service over the internet or listening to over the phone, you probably wouldn't have believed me and I'm sure you certainly wouldn't have been pleased at the prospect of it.

In a typical year, Easter morning here at St Matthias features a chancel & sanctuary adorned with many more flowers; everyone coming together dressed in their Sunday best, embracing and greeting one another, “Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!”, and a worship service culminating in the reception of Holy Communion by our risen Lord.

So this year things surely *must* feel much more understated, as you are watching or listening through some electronic device; gathered with no more than a handful of people, or maybe no one else at all; and knowing that in today's service you won't be able to receive Holy Communion. Therefore, some might be tempted to lament that “This is no way to celebrate easter,” and understandably so. But to the contrary: I would suggest that Easter - the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we celebrate today - is made for times *just like this*.

In fact, the way we experience Easter today, perhaps with mixed emotions, may have much more in common with the experience of Jesus' followers on that first easter than our usual celebration does. #

Judging by the gospel account we just read of that first Easter, it was most certainly a day filled with all variety of emotions for Jesus' followers - both positive and negative. We must remember that the twentieth chapter of John opens after Jesus' followers have just experienced the most traumatic few days of their lives, as their beloved teacher and rabbi was betrayed by one of their own, convicted in a sham trial, before being turned over to Rome for a horrific execution. And since that Friday, Jesus' family and followers have been holed up in their homes. In Jewish culture it was customary that whenever anyone died their closest kin would remain in their home for a period of seven days. But in the case of Jesus' disciples & followers there was the additional fear for their lives. Having been successful at getting the Romans to crucify Jesus, might the Jewish leaders be coming for them - his followers - next?

So you might say everyone associated with Jesus has been sheltering-in-place. And when our passage opens the only reason Mary Magdalene is going out from her home on Sunday morning is to do some "essential business". It is because the initial measures taken to bury Jesus' body on Good Friday were only preliminary. Because they needed to be completed before sundown Friday, when the Jewish Sabbath would begin, the more complete burial rituals would have to wait until sometime after the Sabbath ended at sundown on Saturday.

And so, early Sunday morning - while it was still dark - Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb to complete the burial work that had been left unfinished. But when she arrives she sees "that the stone had been taken away from the tomb." Now, not having to live through the moment ourselves, but getting to read about it after the fact, we know that this is because Jesus has risen. But this possibility is not on Mary's radar. So when she finds the stone rolled away from the tomb it is cause not for joy, but instead it increases her distress. Mary clearly believes Jesus' body has been stolen from the tomb by robbers, which wasn't uncommon in those days. As John tells it, after this Mary goes Peter and the "other disciple...whom Jesus loved" - which is how the gospel writer John refers to himself in his gospel - Mary goes to Peter and John in verse 2 and says to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." And Peter and John run to the tomb, first Peter stoops to look in, and then he and John both go in and see Jesus' body is gone. But when verse 8 says John "saw and believed", this means they believed what Mary had said, that Jesus' body had been taken, not that they believed He had risen from the dead. "For," verse 9 explains, "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." In other words, when John describes he and Peter going back to their homes in verse 10, if they are not devastated like Mary seems to be, at the very least they remain confused about what exactly has transpired! Meanwhile, Mary remains standing outside the tomb, weeping and wondering when this living nightmare will ever end.

And yet, while she is still weeping, Mary stoops to look inside the tomb - seemingly, for her, for the first time - and she sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say to her in verse 13, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And *still* not understanding what has happened, she says to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." And then Mary turns around to see Jesus standing, but with eyes still full of tears, she still does not know it is him. He also asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and adds, "Whom are you seeking?" And supposing him to be the gardener, she pleads, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

It is only when Jesus then speaks her name - "Mary" - that she realizes it is him and that he has risen! Recognizing his voice, she turns back to him and says "Rabboni!" - Rabbi, teacher. She has watched Jesus die (Jn 19:25); she had watched him be buried (Mt 27:61); but now - in the miracle of all

miracles - he is alive! And perhaps Mary goes to embrace him, figuring she lost him once, so now she never wants to let him go. But Jesus says, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." While the result of Jesus' resurrection is that He is alive and that he will never die again, his ascension - which will end up taking place forty days later - the result of his ascension will be that henceforth Jesus will reign over this world where seemed to have triumphed over good. And when, ten days after his ascension, Jesus sends down His Holy Spirit upon all who believe, this will make Jesus forever present and always available to any who enter into a spiritual relationship with him through faith.

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And this leads us now to why Easter, why the good news of Jesus' remarkable resurrection, is made for times even like we are living through right now in the season of pandemic and sheltering-in-place. As each one of us is experiencing in some of the worst cases fear & extreme isolation and even in the best cases probably our fair share of stir-craziness and changes to life as we've been used to it, the truth that Jesus is alive - and the implications of that: that he is at the same time reigning over all of creation and but also personally and intimately available to us through a relationship of prayer - these truths, and our ability to grasp and believe them, are of greater consequence than anything else

When later that evening Jesus comes to the place where his disciples were gathered (in fear) behind lock doors, it is with great purpose that Jesus says to them, "Peace be with you", because this sums up what the risen Lord intends to impart to each one of us: a genuine, inner, spiritual peace that no *one* else and no *thing* else in this world is able to give. Only in Jesus can we find peace with God in spite of our failures and sin; peace with our fellow man, insofar as it depends upon us; peace in all circumstances even those where our lives are at risk, because we know that we are promised eternal life with him who is our wellspring of life, who loves us perfectly, and will never leave us. No, I would suggest that Easter - the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we celebrate today and the peace that He brings - is made for times *just like this* when loneliness and fear, depression and anxiety stalk closely nearby.

In fact, perhaps some of Jesus' words to Mary earlier in this passage are meant for us, as well. For example, his first question to her is "why are you weeping?" Now, there are a lot of different ways we can hear this question, but understand that Jesus does not ask this to condemn her for weeping, but in *compassion* for it and yet, wanting her to recognize that things are not as bad as they seem to her, because he is alive and there *with* her. And the same is true for us. I know there are many of us who in the present circumstances have really been hurting even more than usual, experiencing loneliness or loss, or both. But Jesus wants us to turn to him for comfort, begin to see our circumstances in the light of his presence with us, and to learn from him how to move forward and not be overcome.

On the other hand, I know there are also some of us who are afraid and anxious, or perhaps even angry, about the impact all of this pandemic disease and response may have on the future. But in that case, I believe Jesus' second question to Mary on point, when he asks her pointedly, "What are you seeking?" Jesus taught in Matthew 6 that we need not be anxious about our physical needs, but instead to "seek" first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (v31-33). But it is when we are seeking peace from the world or to secure ourselves apart from God - that the waves of worldly circumstances really do a doozy on us. When we forget that no matter what

Jesus is risen and He is Lord and he will remain with us in all things. It is when we fail to remain mindful that He is on the throne that we find our peace so easily robbed.

So while Jesus promises we will have trouble in this life, that we will experience pain and sorrow and fear and anger like Mary and these disciples, he beckons us to turn to him in those moments... to redirect our weeping and our seeking toward Him. #

So moving forward out of this Easter livestream/celebration today, whatever your circumstances and struggles, I want to invite you to begin seeing them with the risen Jesus in the picture. Remembering that Jesus is always with us can make times that are either awful or awfully boring into an opportunity. So if you do believe Jesus is alive, why don't you ask him as your rabbi to begin use these unique circumstances to teach you how to enter into even more of his peace. Would you do that?

For many of us in this season we have been given an opportunity unlike anything we will probably ever experience again in our lives. With the extra time and freed up schedule that's been imposed on many of us by these circumstance, we could fill that time with just watching more news or distract ourselves til this shelter-in-place thing is over. Or we could ask Jesus to show us some exercise of peace or action of peace we can take to redeem this time, by welcoming more of His peace into our lives.

- And perhaps this might look like asking God how you can bless someone even in your situation.
- It could mean committing to each day reach out and make a call to someone just to see how they're getting on
- This might look like trying out one of our remote Life Groups - giving it just a 3 week trial?
- Or opening yourself up to some mentoring or input from another believer, who has God's peace in some area that you don't

Whatever it is, I hope it's relational and has some component of making ourselves vulnerable to another, because that's where God can really do some work.

Well, in the final verses of our passage, Mary goes and announces to the disciples - likely each at the own homes - that she has seen the Lord, as well as the other things he told her. And her testimony is compelling enough that they respond by all gathering together later that evening - everyone but Thomas - surely to confer about what Mary has claimed, to discuss: "could it really be true???" But verse 19 tells us that seemingly before they can even begin discussing whether Jesus is risen, he shows up! So that's settled; they surely believe now!

But, you know, there's a lot of talk in the Church there's about sharing our faith with others, and rightly so: just as Jesus commissions Mary here to go and testify to the disciples, he has commissioned each one of us (in Mt 28) to go and make disciples and teach others what we have learned about eternal living. And I'm sure most of us who are believers have at least a few people in particular whom our heart is burdened for. And we may put great effort into praying for them and even strategizing about what we might say. But I believe where we can have the greatest capacity to increase our impact for the gospel is by continuing to progress ourselves in learning how to receive and live in his peace.

See, the disciples were already pre-disposed to be open to the possibility that what Mary was testifying to could be true. After all, they had lived with him for going on 3 years and had heard him

talking about dying and rising even if it made little sense to them at the time. But I have to wonder if it was not just what Mary said, but her demeanor and changed disposition - her joy her peace - that was the greatest witness, and that made them think "Mary has clearly experienced something - some good and divine reality - that we haven't!

Well, so many of us have found the ground for the seed of the gospel to be not fertile but hard. Especially with folks who've had a background in toxic churches and left the faith behind, because they think they probably *have* tried the gospel and found it wanting. It has also been pretty well documented that approaches to evangelism that proved to be successful even in the 80s and 90s are simply not resonating the same. The world is changing that rapidly. And many American Christians succumbing tribalism and grasping for power of late hasn't been helping matters, as those with little to no religious background at all see the science-denying and lack of empathy, the fearful lack of tolerance, political self-interestedness, and even outright gaslighting by many Christians and think, "I don't want any part of that". As a result of all this, those of us who believe in seeking to love others into Christ's Kingdom rather than to coerce or manipulate them into it.... clearly have an uphill battle and the deck stacked against us.

But while poor witnesses may have turned closed much of the world off to evangelistic approaches that lead with Jesus, everybody out there is looking for peace. And when they see somebody who has it in ways they don't, they often want to know how and where they got it. So while praying for other people can be powerful, and there is a time to be explicit about the reason for our hope and to testify without shame about who is the ultimate source of the peace we do have... the place where we can make the most hay and the way our testimony can become much more impactful is not by acquiring better arguments, but by continuing to seek *for ourselves* to learn how to receive and live and rest in the never-ending peace that is always on offer from our risen Lord.

Amen.