

Palm Sunday

Year A

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

[RCL] Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

We, the faithful in Christ, gather this morning, not just with our friends and families, but also with Christians around the world and across time, joyfully proclaiming what is perhaps the most ancient creed in Christendom: Christ *is* risen! For the next fifty days, this great and powerful Easter proclamation will mark our liturgy, define our purpose, and affirm our most deeply held belief.

Of course, proclaiming that joyful phrase today amidst the beautiful flowers, the gorgeous music, and in the company of those we love comes easily for most, if not all of us. And yet, for as much as we enjoy the more festive aspects of Easter, the truth is that these things, by themselves, don't tell the whole story.

Along with praise-filled shouts of "Alleluia," the *whole* story of Easter also includes shouts of war and hate; of fear and pain; of confusion and misunderstanding. In the wake of the recent terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom, and in the shadow of war and violence that plague our streets and our planet, these emotions are viscerally familiar to all of us. And although we may lose sight of it here this morning, these emotions also filled the hearts of the faithful on that *first* Easter morning.

The Gospel of John sets the scene: "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." Then, John tells us, she *ran* to share the news with the others. And while John doesn't tell us this part himself, when people get news, they don't typically run unless it's really good news or really bad news!

Mary, it seems fair to say, is distraught—shocked that the body of her beloved Lord isn't in the tomb where he had been laid just three days ago. When she reaches the other disciples with the news, they take off running as well, reaching the tomb only to confirm what Mary had told them. They depart, their hopes dashed; their Easter alleluias muted.

This is where Easter ended: The disciples returned home—confused, saddened, and unsure of what would happen next. John tells us that they "as yet...did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

And who could blame them really? They had put so much trust in Jesus, only to have it squashed by powers and principalities. What were they to do now? Where would they go? Who would they believe in next? These were the questions that raced through the disciples' minds as they came to grips with their grief and disappointment.

But Mary wasn't ready to let go just yet.

Mary stays behind, weeping while she examines the emptiness of the tomb, making sure that no detail or clue goes unseen or unexamined—desperately searching for some shred of evidence; grasping for even the faintest possibility.

Just then, she sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. They ask her why she is weeping and she says, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

We can hear the weight of grief in her voice. And if we're honest with ourselves, we've all had similar moments to the one Mary is experiencing. Moments when we've found ourselves desperately searching for God, only to be met with emptiness and sadness. Have you ever come to church, yearning for the peace and comfort of the sacraments, only to find that God doesn't seem to be there? Has your prayer life ever felt dry and fallow? Have you ever found yourself wondering whether church itself might be futile?

In moments like these, we find ourselves in a kind of spiritual mourning, wondering where Jesus has gone, and why he seems to have been taken away. St. John of the Cross called these moments the “Dark Night of the Soul”—when prayer, sacrament, and community no longer bring comfort, and the transcendence of God's presence seems to have evaporated.¹

There is a well-meaning tendency among many Christians—especially those who have never wrestled deeply with their faith—to liken these moments to a kind of spiritual weakness. “If you only *prayed a little harder* or *believed a little deeper* or *trusted a little more*, then everything would be okay,” they tell us. We needn't look much further than the shelves of our local bookstore for a seemingly endless litany of books offering prescriptions that promise to *fix* our spiritual life.

But as the Trappist monk and priest Thomas Keating reminds us, “The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside of us for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal.”²

In other words, we can't work our way into God's good graces because God doesn't deal in performance evaluations and goals and targets. God doesn't show up on our time or in a manner of our choosing; and our relationship with God cannot be converted into a checklist or a “how to” guidebook.

This is the lesson that Mary learned on that first Easter, and it's the one that God is still trying to teach us 2,000 years later. In the midst of her desperate search for clues about what might have happened to Jesus' body, a man walks by and asks Mary why she is so distraught. And desperately hoping that he would know something she didn't, she says, “If you know where he is—if you've taken him

¹ See TJ Tetzlaff's essay for Easter Day (Year C), entitled, “The Unlikely Evangelist” in *Modern Metanoia* 14 March 2016, <http://modernmetanoia.org/2016/03/14/easter-day-c-the-unlikely-evangelist/>

² Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 38.

somewhere else—just tell me where and I will take him myself.” If you will just tell me what to do or where to go, I’ll do it! It’s as if she’s saying, “Give me a target! Give me a goal! What are the five simple steps that I need to accomplish?”

And that’s when it happens: Jesus calls her by name! “Mary!” And when she hears it, she is overcome! She cries out, “Rabbouni! Teacher!”

With these words, Mary experiences the very first Easter moment! She realizes that Christ’s difficult and at times unbelievable teachings are true—that what he promised at the Last Supper has come to pass!

Mary’s witness to the first Easter is about far more than beautiful worship and festive celebrations. Mary brings us face to face with the depths of our humanity. Her witness is a mosaic of the human experience—grief and joy; uncertainty and affirmation; depression and determination. This is the true witness of Easter!

Even in the depths of our despair and grief, when things just seem to keep piling up with no end in sight, and even when we just don’t know if we believe it anymore, the God made known to us in Jesus Christ has a way of showing up where we least expect him!

But if we’re not careful, we’ll close the book as if the story ends right here. Mary recognizes the Resurrected Lord and everyone lives happily ever after. But this isn’t the end of the story. In fact, if we keep reading, we realize that Easter isn’t a story at all! It’s a commissioning!

Once Mary recognizes Jesus, he says to her, “...Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” The moment that Mary leaves the garden, the Good News of Easter gets loose and begins to transform the world! Mary bears witness to the fact that, even in the face of death itself, God will have the last word!

Through her first Easter witness, Mary teaches us that grief and joy, uncertainty and affirmation, desperation and determination, are all inescapable parts of our humanity. She teaches us that our lives of faith aren’t about success or opportunities for advancement; rather, they are holy mysteries that will surprise, unsettle, and transform us. But most important of all, she teaches us that in the resurrection of our Lord Christ, we know that love, hope, and peace will ultimately prevail!

And so, in this Eastertide, may we proclaim that Christ is risen, not simply in church, but also in the world around us. May we proclaim it, not simply with our lips, but also with our hands and hearts. And as we live into the joy and promise of Easter, may we go forth into the world, looking for the Resurrected Christ in places we may not expect.

May we search for Christ amidst those who are cast down and rejected; among those who have nobody to care for them; and in the company of those who have never known the loving embrace of friendship.

The world needs this now, perhaps more than ever before. But most of all, may we not simply proclaim the Good News, may we also believe it so that the whole world may see Christ in their midst and proclaim, “The Lord is risen indeed!”

Alleluia!

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