

Easter 2020  
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In the second century of the Roman Empire followers of Jesus would place laurel wreaths on graves, a tradition generally reserved for crowning the victors in athletic contests. When they were asked why they did it they would always say, "Because we believe that in Jesus Christ we have received victory over the power of the grave."

We are in the midst of a very different kind of Easter this year. That first Holy Week when things moved from the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through the events of the week was not what the disciples expected. And for different reasons our week has been different than what we ordinarily expect. Perhaps there's not been a time when we need to hear the Easter story more than today. And certainly the Christian hope - expectation - that it offers us. Mary Magdalene discovers that the stone has been removed from the tomb and runs to tell Peter and the beloved disciple. The two of them then run to the tomb, the beloved disciple racing ahead with Peter venturing in and the beloved disciple following. And then the two men simply go home. Despite the surprise of what they and Mary have seen, it seems like it's all over.

Mary, though exhausted and grief-stricken remains. Only when the man whom she assumes is the gardener speaks her name does the truth of what she's experiencing break through to her. It is Jesus, risen from the dead. He stays only long enough to make himself known, to ask Mary not to hold onto him, to tell her that he is ascending to the Father, and to ask her to tell this to the disciples. But she knows that her grief and mourning have been transformed and that the lives of the disciples are about to change in ways they never dreamed possible.

Well, today is Easter and everything is made new through the power of the Resurrection, the victory of power over the grave! But, of course, the Easter story continues to unfold in Acts and by the time we hear from Peter, a lot more has happened. Throughout Jesus' life on earth, Peter's insistence on looking at what God had done in the past consistently clouded his vision of what God was doing through Jesus in the present, and as we know, none of the disciples understood or accepted Jesus's own prediction of crucifixion and resurrection. But in the joy and surprise of the resurrection's wake, Peter and his fellow disciples resume healing and preach to their fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah whom God raised from the dead. In the course of his ministry, Peter travels to Greece, where he and a Roman centurion, a Gentile, each has dreams that lead to a meeting between them - even though Jewish law forbade their association because it was deemed ritually unclean. In that encounter, Peter realizes that the power and mercy that God made known through Jesus extends to all, not just Jews. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," says Peter, who for so long could only see God's hand and Jesus' life through the lens of a faithful Jew. And then, as the Gentiles who had come to hear him are overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, Peter baptizes them - lots of them.

This resurrection hope is what brings us together today. We remember and celebrate Jesus' triumph over a horrific and seemingly inevitable death. We've been inspired by the power of the gospel to believe and celebrate that nothing stops God's love for all of us or takes away our hope - ever - not even death. And we are still part of an amazing and ongoing story.

And always, God shows up, even if, like Mary, we don't recognize God at first. And if we ever wonder whether God would show up for us - if we're one of those with serious doubts about the story, or one just getting started on the faith journey, or well on the path, who may for some reason think that God would skip over us - remember that the story of scripture is that God

most often shows up, not to the most likely but the least likely, not to the most qualified but to those who we would think aren't qualified at all.

So Jesus shows up. Not death, not a tomb, not a stone – absolutely nothing - can hold him. Our fears, doubts, or worries cannot keep him away. Not even Mary's inability to see Jesus can hold him back. So in the whisper of her name the lights come on, and hope is revealed, and she discovers that she was never really alone at all. It is revealed to her that there is more promise, and more love, and more joy in this existence than she could ever have imagined – that there is newness of life and the brightness of a new day.

Because what the story of Jesus' resurrection proclaims to us is that nothing, absolutely nothing is stronger than God's power to bring new life to it--no habit is too ingrained, no heart is too broken, no pandemic is too overwhelming, no person is unworthy. It doesn't end there. Our faith understands the risen Christ as God's protest against death and against any person or system that works for death.

We are called by name and transformed by love. While we can't gather with one another physically this Easter we remind ourselves that all the sacrifices we are making for the sake of others is sharing in the resurrected life and love of Christ. Singer songwriter Jana Stanfield tells us that as a part of that story, "I cannot do all the good that the world needs. But the world needs all the good I can do." God rolls away the stones of our tombs that we too might live at the center of the loving heart of God.

It bears repeating again from our sermons in Lent: The understanding by the Israelites in Hebrew Scripture was always that the covenant relationship begins with God's action toward God's people, not the other way around. God is always seeking to be in relationship with us. Covenant says that God doesn't love us based on some conditions we meet. Rather, God chooses to love us because it is God's choice. God doesn't say if you do this or that I'll love you. God just keeps loving us and keeps his promises that have seemed impossible from the start. Like Israel, our only job is to struggle with accepting God's love and do our best to be obedient to God's ways and be an Easter people because we believe that in Jesus Christ we have received victory over the power of the grave.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia! Happy Easter, everybody!