



Sermon, April 16, 2017  
Easter Sunday  
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

## “That Voice”

**Preparation to Receive Scripture:** *At what times in your life have you felt as if your world had just ended, and you had no idea what was going to come next?*

**Scripture: John 20:1-18**

### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

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. 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.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

### **Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene**

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and 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. 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.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus 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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus 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.”’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **Mary**

The early morning quiet, the sound of birds, buzzing of insects, Crunch of footsteps on the rocky and sandy ground...

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The sounds of gasps, running away, sounds of panting and footsteps running again. But one person remains at the tomb, weeping. As if the events of the last two days were not enough to wrench her heart from her chest, now the final injury, the indignation, the twist of the knife – the body is gone.

### **Us**

Have you ever stood where Mary stood that morning so long ago? I don't mean there in that particular garden in Jerusalem, but in the garden of grief?

Craig Barnes says this about this place of grief and emptiness:

Earlier this week, an old couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to come for a visit over the holidays after all. "The grandkids say hello." They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone they didn't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company and they had to let her go. "So sorry." She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her kids.

Earlier this week, someone received terrible news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, "I don't love you anymore." Earlier this week, someone's hope was crucified. And the darkness is overwhelming.

No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It's about more hope than we can handle. (Craig Barnes, "Savior at Large," article in *The Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002 p. 16.)

### **Grief and Emptiness**

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If you have ever been there, or maybe you are there now, in this valley of darkness, you know what Mary was feeling. You know how she longed for some sign of hope, but she was feeling, as the prophet Ezekiel says, "clean cut off."

We need hope to survive. A number of years ago when I was going through a divorce, a parishioner sent me this quote:

Hope is that slender thread that we shoot across the abyss of despair, so that we may later haul across the ropes of reality. We are not meant to swing across the chasm on glimmering strands of hope. They are there to guide us as we do the hard work of building the bridges upon which we may all walk across for generations to come. (Source unknown)

In order to step into the future, we need the slender thread of hope to be there to let us know that a way will open up, that there is solid ground upon which to walk, that there will be companions to share the journey and the work.

Mary needed that sort of hope. Can you blame her? This man, whom she was only beginning to understand, whose teachings she was just starting to fathom, whose very life seem to shine with such a radiance – of what? It was so like the sun gliding across the rippled lake, so like a thousand birds in chorus, so filled with an abundance of life – it was love-come-in-the-flesh, that's what it was. Jesus radiated love, and it was a love that turned everything right-side-up again.

She needed some sign of hope that that love had not ended, that the love that was at the center of the universe, the love that held all things together wasn't just a shadow in the night, some flash in the pan. Jesus was always performing signs, healing people, feeding 5000 families at a whack with just a few loaves of bread, changing water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead – she needed a sign of hope.

And then there was that voice. It simply said, "Mary."

Hope didn't come as a pious platitude: "Keep your chin up Mary," "God never gives you more than you can handle," "All you need is faith,"

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"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," etc. Hope came in physical form, in the sound born on the morning's breeze, the voice of One who spoke her name. "Mary."

The hope that comes is usually not accompanied by a loud blaring of trumpets, regardless of how much noise we have made here today. For Mary, it was a few simple words spoken in the quiet of a garden.

This story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death into life is all about how words of hope can raise us up from the graveyards we find ourselves trapped within back into life. Sometimes, though, we secretly yearn for magic or a miraculous fix, or get confused about the power of the Easter message. Take, for instance, what happened to a young novice at a monastery:

Young novice at monastery – first Holy Week and Easter vigil as member of the order. He was a "Modern-thinker," wanted to "de-mythologize" the faith, do away with all the superstition.

This monastery was famous for the Easter tradition of the sequestered Christ candle:

Final act of the Good Friday Tenebrae service was extinguishing the Christ candle.

The candle was then taken out and locked in a symbolic sepulcher, which was a door just off of the chancel area.

Then there was a continuous vigil from that moment until Easter morning at sunrise.

At sunrise the abbot, accompanied by two or three of the monks, would make his way through the crowd of faithful pilgrims and townspeople gathered inside and outside the church and go up to the sealed door. The door would be unsealed and he would step inside, along with one of the monks.

Everyone breathlessly waited to see if the candle would have been lit miraculously during the night. If the Abbot found a lit candle, he would bring it out and announce in Latin, "*Et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae*

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*eam non comprehenderunt*: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

A great cheer would go up, people would drop to their knees in prayer, people would come forward and request prayers for healing or overwhelmed with joy would give their lives to God. This miracle had occurred year after year for centuries now.

This year, everything proceeded as usual. The church was crowded with people for the Tenebrae service, and many remained during the all-night vigil Friday night, all day Saturday into that night. Then Sunday morning, before dawn, the Abbot roused the novice and two other monks to accompany him to the church. How exciting! The novice could hardly contain his excitement. Now he would see firsthand whether this candlelighting was truly a miracle or not.

As they made their way through the crowd, he recognized many of the faces. This man with an eager tear-stained face was an alcoholic whose life was in shambles. This woman's husband had just died and she was near despair. These young persons struggled with faith, and had come to church to see if there was anything to believe in.

They went up to the sealed door, and unsealed it. The abbot went in, and motioned for the novice to come as well. And what the novice saw took his breath away. The candle was not lit! Non-plussed by this, the abbot went over to the candle, lit it and presented the candle to the faithful. *et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

A cheer went up as usual. There was singing, music swelled, people fell to their knees. People surged up around the chancel rail, asking for prayers, for healing, for a word of blessing. The abbot and monks were busy for nearly an hour. The young novice, however, was thunderstruck by what he had seen, and moved in a daze.

After the service, when they were alone, the novice confronted the abbot.

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"How dare you perpetrate such superstitious behavior with such charlatanry! These people rely upon you for spiritual truth, and all you give them is carnival sideshow trickery! This is no miracle!"

The abbot looked at the novice for a long moment. He motioned for him to sit down. "So, do you think the lit candle is a miracle?" "Well, yes, isn't that the point?" "If you think so, then you are the superstitious one, not the people who come to worship here." "What do you mean?" the novice asked.

"The miracle that occurred today is not that the candle was lit in secret, but that a man who has been bound by an addiction to alcohol placed his life in the hands of God Almighty, that a young widow with several children was filled with new hope for her life, and that two young persons who had no faith have met the risen Lord in their hearts. The miracle of today is not what happens in this little room, but what happens out here."

The real miracle of Easter is not so much the empty tomb – as marvelous as that may be – the real miracle is that the Risen One still speaks to all the aching emptiness of our souls. The real miracle is that Jesus still comes and lives in human hearts.

This is the Easter message: whatever tomb we stand beside, whatever graveyard we are standing in, whatever plans or dreams have been shattered and crumbled into dust, there is a voice that can come to us, and speak our name.

(Say a few names)

Let's bow our heads in prayer.

(In prayer, invite everyone to say and repeat their name a few times, listening for the Lord's voice speaking to them.)