

Easter Sunday 2021
Mark 16:1-8 and I Corinthians 15:1-11
April 4, 2021
Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough

Christ is Risen! May the glad news of God raising Christ from the grave settle deep within your heart. May his risen life awaken your life. May we be blessed with courage to be Easter people, now and always.

Often on Easter morning we share the story of Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden. Mary stands weeping by his empty tomb when the Risen Lord calls to her. Tears of sorrow transform into tears of joy. The scene is primed for movie screen, with the camera zooming in upon Mary's face, making a sweeping panoramic of the garden's springtime glory, and then finding Jesus. The music swelling to a crescendo, as he says, Mary, this one exchange signaling the world's redemption.

But there lives a different account of the Resurrection. The story we heard today. This version is nowhere near as pretty. Nowhere near as sun-drenched nor triumphant. Lasting only eight verses, it ends with a preposition, "they were afraid, you see . . ." What message do we wrestle from this scenario: a rolled-away stone, an empty grave, and three terrified witnesses fleeing the scene?

Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome had watched together Jesus's crucifixion. By that dreadful day the crowds, who had so loved and surrounded Jesus in the beginning, had disappeared. The disciples had deserted him. The religious authorities had gone home, satisfied in securing his death. Three women, along with the soldiers doing their job, remained.

Mary Magdalene was a disciple, a fierce follower of Jesus from the time he healed her of her demons. She displayed a leadership that suggested she had the skills, means, and commitment to work alongside Jesus toward the healed world he was building. The second Mary is identified by her mothering of James. This Mary may well have been the mother of many, and James may well have been a cousin of Jesus. Let's mark this Mary by her care. Like the best kinds of aunts, she had loved Jesus before his public ministry, when he was a kid fiddling around his father's carpentry shop. Her heart held the bottomless compassion that compels one to stay even when the child is in pain. Lastly, there was Salome, of whom we know the least. Was she a friend of Mary Magdalene's? A witness to a healing? A tag-a-long after a miracle? Salome represents the person who stumbles across Jesus's path, who hungers for the hope he offers, reacts to the power of his presence, and goes along without realizing the cost of the journey until the cross comes into view. These three women - the disciple, the caretaker, the seeker - witnessed the crucifixion - and now they want to prepare Jesus's body, fully, for burial.

When someone dies, it is the rituals we cling to: Wash the body. Anoint with spices. Wrap the cloths. Select the grave -marker. Order the flowers. Write the eulogy. It has been painful this

past year not to be able to perform these sacred tasks together. The rituals themselves do not alter the reality of death, but they do help us metastasize the loss. They help us make it through the days.

On the way to the tomb, the women ask each other, “Who will move the stone placed at the entrance?” What a curious question. They can’t complete their burial tasks without access to site. Surely, they had a plan for this dilemma before setting out with the spices. But then, grief messes with the mind. Grief makes it hard to think clearly. Maybe their conversation about logistics was a sideways admission. We cannot halt death. We were helpless amid the cruelty, lies, and brutality of Friday and here on Sunday, we are not strong enough, smart enough, resourceful enough to roll away the things that block life.

When they arrive, the stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. A stranger tells them, stop seeking the living among the dead. God has raised the crucified one. Here is our Resurrection proclamation: an empty tomb, a promise that Jesus has gone ahead, to meet us in the days to come.

It is tempting, and comforting to imagine the Resurrection as a reunion, to picture Jesus, completely healed, consoling the grieving, wiping away their tears as if to wipe away the horrors of the previous days. But this strange, shocking, mysterious, and fear-filled scene gets closer to the way Resurrection happens. We want to go back to the way things were before. God calls us into new life, a life we may not recognize. We want the past to be undone, its horrors obliterated, but it is the crucified one who is resurrected. Here at the site of God’s great act is grief, tears, trauma and trembling. This is where Resurrection begins. The women run away; their feet saying what their mouths do not: we are bruised, battered, we are not ready for a force powerful enough to roll away stones and raise Jesus. We are scared to walk into God’s unleashed life.

Mark’s resurrection account is called an incomplete one. Later scribes added a second, longer ending, tacking on cheerier stories about post-resurrection appearances. But I believe Mark left the ending open so that we would be forced to claim the Resurrection, in all its shock and strangeness, for ourselves. We are to look at the heavy stone and think about the things that block our path, the rocks that we cannot roll away, but God can. We are to peer into the empty tomb and see it as empty; and think about the empty chairs at our tables, the places absent from healing, the hollowness of our violent, cynical, and too often selfish world. Mark says the Resurrection starts right here, where death is strongest. Resurrection starts right here, where it is most needed. Jesus has been raised. Imagine what his aliveness might mean for you.

Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salone run back to their lodging, those temporary rooms in Jerusalem where they have been staying for Passover. For a while they cannot speak of what they saw or heard, even to each other. They simply sit, watching the sun travel across the horizon, holding the scenes in their minds’ eyes: ugly cross, a cry of dereliction, a stone rolled aside, a stranger saying, “Do not be afraid, he has gone ahead of you.” If you sit with the Resurrection long enough, the empty space in front of the tomb becomes not a gaping hole but

an open door, as Rowan Williams suggests.¹ The empty door is a threshold into a different life, a future from which God calls them into something utterly new. Salome suggests what they all have been thinking. It is time to return home, to Galilee, to trust Risen Jesus would meet them there in the days ahead, to give flesh, shape, and meaning to the angel's promise. What they experienced becomes what we now believe: those who step out in faith find the Risen Christ meeting them in the dailiness of their lives, offering shape, purpose and meaning in how to live that Easter truth.

How will we respond to this incomplete ending, this open door? Are you grieving, exhausted, or tired of hoping? Are you scared of what the power of God unleashed in your life might ask of you? Fear not. The Resurrection creates an unbreakable bond between the crucified places of life and God's power to generate healing, newness, and love. Nothing can separate us from God. No death can conquer God's passion for us. Go out into your life and find the Risen Christ there, ready to walk with you into newness.

¹ Williams, Rowan, "Into Daylight" in *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 125.