

“Out of the Tomb”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Second Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

¹Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.



Sermon: “Out of the Tomb”

I have a confession to make: I hate mornings. I realize that may not be very controversial, but it’s true. Having to get up early in the morning is just the worst. My father was a career military man so even years after he retired he was still getting up at 5:00 a.m., without an alarm. It was just habit; muscle memory. He used to tell me “Son, it’s a whole different world out there first thing in the morning.” And I’d say, “Well dad, I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

When my alarm went off at 6:00 this morning (Ugh!) the first thing I thought was “poor Mary Magdalene.” She had to get up before dawn to go down to the grave of her dear friend, to finish preparing his body for burial. Getting up early is hard enough but, getting up early to go say goodbye to a friend had to have been heart-wrenching. There’s no amount of caffeine that can make that morning better. But hers is the story that brings us together *this* morning, on *this* Easter Sunday. Some call it the greatest story ever told. For some it is familiar - maybe even rote. While some have never heard the story at all.

In that story we see Mary Magdalene come to the tomb before first light and upon finding the stone has already been rolled away and that Jesus’ body is gone, she rushes back to tell the disciples. The Beloved Disciple and Peter race to the

tomb to see for themselves. The Beloved Disciple stops at the entrance and peers inside, but Peter rushes right in there and has himself a look around.

Neither find any sign of Jesus. The only thing they find is the linen cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus' body before burial, rolled up in separate piles. Once we're able to step back from the emotion and confusion of the moment, we can see that this is more than a curious detail. It is evidence that this was not the work of grave robbers because linen was very expensive and grave robbers would have certainly taken the linen to sell. So, we know that something else has happened here.

The author tells us that seeing, the Beloved Disciple believed. Now what did the Beloved Disciple believe, exactly? John writes that "as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead." Does this mean the disciple did not yet understand until he saw the empty tomb or that even in the empty tomb, he believed but still did not understand? It's a little unclear. Either way, having seen the tomb, he and Peter returned home, leaving Mary behind, in tears, lost in her pain, alone.

We know how the story turns out, but at this point in the narrative, Peter, The Beloved Disciple, and Mary would have had some obvious questions. Where *was* Jesus' body? Did he really rise from the dead? Did someone take his body and claim a resurrection? Had he just been buried in the wrong tomb? Where is the proof one way or the other?

In Matthew's version of the story. The Pharisees placed guards at the tomb to make sure no one stole the body and made false claims. After Jesus' resurrection, those guards were reportedly paid to claim that supporters of Jesus had actually come and taken his body.¹ And all four gospels claim that when the first woman reached the tomb on the morning of the third day, she found it empty.² But none of the gospel writers attempt to explain exactly how it came to be empty and by what process Jesus was raised. Because it's enough to say that the tomb was empty.

Frederich Buechner makes a very important point about this. He says:

*"It hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing because ... what convinced people that he had risen from the dead was not the absence of his corpse, but his living presence. And so it has been ever since."*³

But Mary hasn't had that experience yet. She is still lost in the moment, the details coming too quick to process. That tends to happen to us in crisis situations or moments of surprise when we try to make sense of what is going on, but we don't have all the information and, even if we do, the significance of what is happening escapes us. Researchers call this "Situational Awareness" - having a grasp on what is going on around you and what it means.

I'll give you an example. Last week the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris burned. More accurately, the roof and spire of the Cathedral of Notre Dame burned. Most of the church remains intact. Paris fire chief, Jean-Claude Gallet said that the structure, including its two front towers, had been "saved and preserved as a whole," but that two-thirds of the roof had been destroyed.⁴ Much of the art and relics housed there were saved from the flames, including the stained-glass windows.⁵ But as the fire filled our social media feeds last week and danced alive on our television screens, many people began to mourn the loss of a classic piece of gothic architecture, before the extent of the damage was even known.

One Reddit user posted a picture of one of the famed rose windows with the note that it was such a tragedy that these windows had been destroyed.⁶ They hadn't. Another user shared a photo of the burning cathedral with the comment "700 years of human history collapsing before our eyes."⁷ It didn't.

But in the heat of the moment, it can be difficult to get a handle on exactly what's going on. It's only when you can piece together the details and process the information that you really begin to understand what is happening. Sometimes that can't happen until days or even weeks later.

That's what's going on for Mary Magdalene in this story. She has arrived at the tomb and found it empty, but she doesn't fully understand what has really happened or what it means. So, she puts it into the only framework she has: Her friend is dead and now someone has stolen his body.

This has been a hard week for the people like Mary who knew and loved Jesus. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy, he was brought down by law and order allied with religion." The injustice, the senselessness of his death must have hung heavy over those who knew and loved him. And for Mary especially. After the

tragedy of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, after the crowds turned on Jesus and the powers and principalities condemned him to a cruel death, after her interminable Sabbath wait to be able to come and perform the rituals to prepare his body for proper burial . . . after all of that, she finds that his final resting place has been desecrated; all that remained of his mortal life, stolen.

A tide of emotion washed over her: indignation, disappointment, anger, grief. And the tears came, hot and bitter. *For her*, the empty tomb was not yet evidence of anything extraordinary. She was too close to the moment to see clearly. It was only the sign of deep wound made even deeper.

After Peter and the Beloved Disciple leave her, Mary looks again into the tomb. John includes the detail that she has to bend down to see in. Maybe she looked again, hoping that she might see something she had missed before, hoping that her eyes had deceived her the first time. And this time she *does* see something that wasn't there before: two angels dressed in white. They ask her why she is crying and she explains to them, asking if they know where Jesus has been taken.

Then turning around, she sees a third man standing nearby. Who is this? We, the readers, are told that this is Jesus, but Mary does not recognize him. He, too, asks Mary why she is crying. As she struggles to make sense of what is going on, she decides that this must be the gardener. So, she asks *him* if *he* might know where they have taken Jesus so that she might go and find his body. Then she turns back to the tomb. She seems unable to look away from it. The light of Easter morning has not yet dawned for her. She is drawn to the darkness of the tomb. It is the source and focus of her grief, and anger, and loss.

But what finally breaks the spell, drawing her attention away from the grave, is the warm, familiar voice of Jesus *calling her by name*, "Mary." It is then that she turns away from the tomb for good, and toward the risen Christ. The empty tomb did not convince her. The heavenly messengers could not convince her. None of the evidence that we point to in the story, the neatly rolled linen cloths, the heavy stone rolled away, none of that could convince her. But encountering the risen Jesus, she believes.

I find Mary Magdalene so interesting because I think her experience that first Easter morning embodies our own struggles to trust that God is working-out God's purposes even in the face of evil, sickness, and devastation.

Three times Mary looks into the tomb: When she first arrives and finds it empty, after the two disciples leave and she sees the angels, and then again after she asks the gardener where they've taken Jesus' body. She was drawn to the tomb. Her grief, her fear, her uncertainty, her questions, are there. In the tomb there is darkness and death. In the tomb there is the trial and torture and crucifixion of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But when Jesus calls her name, *he draws her out of the tomb*; out of the darkness of her despair and into the light of Easter morning.

You see, two saving events happen on Easter. Jesus is raised from death; he leaves the tomb and when he does, he bears witness to God's immutable power over sin and death. The worst that we can do is *not* more powerful than the best of what God wills for the world. And we are reassured that, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans,

*"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*⁸

Because of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, we can face death reassured of the promise of eternal life. But a second thing happens that morning: Jesus draws *us* out of the tomb, too.

The passage from Isaiah we read earlier reminds us that God wills peace and goodness for us. Life is meant to be joyful. But we sometimes find ourselves in our own tombs; dark, cold places that leave us feeling cut-off from the abundant life that God wills for us. Sometimes those tombs are of our own making: regret from crucial mistakes we can't take back, guilt over life choices we wish we could do over, harsh words spoken in anger, old grudges which we can't let go.

And sometimes those tombs are chosen for us: the choices made by others, maybe even by loved ones, that have devastating effects on us; the pain we feel after the death of a loved one; anxiety over jobs and family and trying to reach our full potential; addiction, fear, disability, either our own or that of someone we love; depression, poverty, worry, loss. Sometimes we spend a lot of time in those tombs.

I know. My father died last summer. I don't think I've ever felt grief like I did when I put the box containing his ashes into the niche in the columbarium. I felt like I was left in that niche, too. But while grief is a natural place to visit, I know that God does not want me to live there. And when I feel myself going back, I am reminded of Jesus calling to Mary, drawing her back from the darkness of the tomb, into the light of God's grace, and mercy, and steadfast love. In this life there is joy and love and justice and light. And I hear the voice of Jesus calling me into that life every day.

At first, Mary couldn't look away from the tomb and it affected her ability to process what was going on around her. How long might she have stayed there, staring into the darkness? How long might she have stood there grieving, consumed by anger and sadness? But when Jesus speaks her name, he saves her, too. He pulls her out of the tomb and brings her into the light of Easter morning; into the light of abundant life.

Getting stuck in our personal tombs can be easy. In fact, it can get sort of comfortable in there. But God desires more for us than the tomb. The vision of God's kingdom described in Isaiah reminds us that God desires more and better for us than we now know. In God's Kingdom there is health and well-being, there is peace, and cooperation. In God's Kingdom there is no longer competition for scarce resources and fear of the other; there is life abundant.

On Easter morning we celebrate, because the worst the powers and principalities of this world could do was nothing in the face of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love. And because of that we have been given life eternal. But we also celebrate that in this life, we are called forth from the tombs, both of our own making and those thrust upon us, by the love and light of Christ.

On this Easter morning we hear the voice of Jesus calling each of us by name, calling us out of our tombs, bringing us back into the light of life, and for that we can be thankful.

It is Easter morning! Alleluia! Christ is Risen! And by the grace of God, so are we!

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen .

End Notes

¹ Matthew 27:62-66, 28:11-15, NRSV

² Matthew 28:1-6, Mark 16:1-7, Luke 24:1-3, John 20:1-2, NRSV

³ Buechner, Frederick. *The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2005. 87. Print.

⁴ Times, The New York. "What We Know and Don't Know About the Notre-Dame Fire." N. Y. Times, 16 Apr. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/15/world/europe/notre-dame-fire-what-we-know.html.

⁵ "Rebuilding Notre Dame: The next steps for Paris's famous cathedral." Washington Post, 18 Apr. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/rebuilding-notre-dame.

⁶ "My picture of the Stained Glass Rose Window that was destroyed today." reddit, 18 Apr. 2019, www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/bdkfs2/my_picture_of_the_stained_glass_rose_window_that.

⁷ "700 years of human history collapsing before our eyes." reddit, 18 Apr. 2019, www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/bdjplc/700_years_of_human_history_collapsing_before_our.

⁸ Romans 8:38-39, NRSV