

“Again and Again, the Sun Rises” Mark 16:1-8
Sunday, April 4, 2021 Resurrection of the Lord Sunday

Rev. Michele Ward

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The world has learned to grieve in new ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Egypt, family members are not allowed to wash the bodies of their deceased loved ones before burial. In India, mourners cannot have funeral pyres in the Ganges River. Attending a wake and sitting shiva in person are out of the question, and several of these moved to online platforms like Zoom. The World Health Organization has even put together a guide for mourners, recommending that no one touch or kiss the body due to concerns of contamination.¹ Funerals as we traditionally would have them in the United States look different, too. We have learned how to mourn from a distance, bury our dead in isolation, and postpone memorial services and celebrations of life. I, too, am one of those millions of mourners around the world grieving differently this year. As my grandmother in California entered hospice last fall, I could not be with her to say goodbye. Due to her fragile state and the possibility that I might transmit the virus due to cross country travel, I stayed here in Baltimore and waited to be with my family until after she passed.

Dr. William Hoy, clinical professor at Baylor University says, “The gathered community is essential to the grief process and the funeral process; it’s as near a universal as we’ve got.”² We need to be together on a basic level in order to grieve. We need the comfort of our friends and family around us when we suffer loss of any kind, particularly loss through death. No matter the funerary and burial traditions, we spiritually and emotionally need these rites in order to grieve and celebrate the ones we love.

Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome faced significant risk going to the tomb of Jesus Christ that morning. They went at first light so they would not be seen by anyone. The disciples have all scattered and the Jesus movement seems lost. They waited for the first three days after his death to visit. These are the most intense days of grieving and sitting shivah in Judaism, and they chose to turn their mourning into action by visiting his tomb. Often, preachers and scholars lift the women up as the most faithful because they stayed at his side as he breathed his last on Friday. You may also remember Mark refers to the women at the crucifixion as supporters of Jesus, which some scholars believe included financial support of his ministry. It is safe to imagine that some of the women coming to the tomb may have been part of his ministry’s economic support system. They are coming to find closure of how they have invested their time, their love, and their money. They have come to the tomb in order to properly bury him and move on with their lives. They did not come to see if he

¹“The Coronavirus Funeral: How the World Has Learned to Grieve in a Pandemic.” Written by Claire Felter and Lindsay Maizland. Photography by Sabine Baumgartner. May 19, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/article/coronavirus-funeral-how-world-has-learned-grieve-pandemic>

²“The Coronavirus Funeral.”

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had been raised from the dead, to bring Jesus a meal or fresh clothes. If they had truly believed Jesus would resurrect, they would not have come bearing the necessary spices and oils to anoint his body as it decayed and decomposed.

If they had truly believed Jesus would resurrect, they would not be concerned about moving away the stone. The only line of dialogue in this passage is a question from the women about how they will manage to roll away the stone. Their main concern is whether they will be strong enough to move it in order to perform this final ritual. These stones could weigh thousands of pounds, depending on their size, so this is a practical question. The women need contact with Jesus’s body for this final ritual. If they cannot move the stone, what is the point of making this journey to the tomb in the first place?

When I hear this question, I think of the people in my life who take care of the practical details as part of how they grieve. They make meals, they clean the house, they take care of the mundane in order for the world to keep turning a little more smoothly. Mary, Salome, and Mary Magdalene are the practical mourners that come in the early morning to find closure and relief.

This is not what they receive at the tomb. They do not receive closure, or quiet, or space for tears, or relief. When they show up, the stone has already been rolled away. They enter the tomb, and to their right, they see a young man in white. This is clearly not Jesus, and not someone they know. He tells them, like most angels do in the gospels, to not be afraid. They are alarmed, and say nothing. The women remain mute as the young man tells them what they already know--Jesus died and was buried here. He tells them something they do not know--Jesus has already left and is on his way to Galilee. The young man commissions them to be the first evangelists and to tell the disciples the good news so they can all meet Jesus there. God raised Jesus from the dead, just like Jesus said. The women cannot and will not do this. They run away from the young man, terrified and amazed. They go their own way, and do not seek out the disciples in order to tell them about the resurrection, the young man, or the location of Jesus. And why is this? They were afraid of what their discipleship would cost them.

The complexity of these women in grief and disbelief resonates with the state of our world currently. Most of us are in some version of grief, fear, and disbelief right now. The coronavirus has killed 2.8 million people worldwide.³ According to the Gun Violence Archive, their 2020 statistics show that mass shootings

³“Global Shots Pass 500 Million; Biden Boosts Goal: Virus Update.” March 24, 2021.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-24/brazil-tops-300-000-deaths-singapore-eases-rules-virus-update>

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are up 47%,⁴ which does not account for the twenty mass shootings that took place over the course of two weeks this March.⁵ The trail of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd in Minnesota last summer, just wrapped up its first week on Good Friday.⁶ We have much to fear--a global pandemic, mass shootings, and police violence. We have much in common with these women at the tomb this morning.

Authentic hope can be born out of our deepest losses and fears. Hope is rooted in the solid belief that a better way, a better day, a better world is possible. The young man offers this hope to the women at the tomb, and they go silent. They are stunned in the face of the brilliant light of authentic hope. God did not disappoint them. They came prepared for a burial rite, and an angel greeted them with the news they could not believe. The good news for us this morning is that death does not have the final say. Jesus has taken the suffering and pain of this world and transformed it into life--life that is available for each and everyone of us, if we would be so bold as to accept it. The disciples scattered, and did not visit the tomb. They lived in fear, unable to trust God would raise Jesus from the dead. The women make it to the tomb ready to see his dead body, and they run away in fear, and do not follow the angel's instructions. The hope of the resurrection is too much for them all. It is easier to give in to fear and disbelief than it is to believe with hope. It is easier to stick to rituals and practicalities than it is to trust that God will do what God promises to do. It is easier to wallow in despair than to get up and face a new day. It is easier to avoid our grief than it is to face our pain with bravery.

The young man invites them back into the story of God's hope as the dawn breaks over them inside the tomb, but they cannot see. The women cannot see what God has done. They are too caught up in what they expected and they have already given up. The women thought they were “off the costly hook of discipleship only to discover--to their terror and amazement--the challenge still before them.”⁷ Hoping for the resurrection would cost them too much, and so

⁴ “A Very Deadly Year’: Mass Shootings Surge During Covid-19.” March 1, 2021. Marco della Cava and Mike Stucka.

<https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2021/03/01/oregon-mass-shootings-surge-in-as-nation-faces-record-high/6837899002/>

⁵ “At Least 20 Mass Shootings Have Taken Place in the Two Weeks Since the Metro Atlanta Spa Attacks, Leaving 8 Dead.” Madeline Holcombe. April 1, 2021.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/01/us/two-weeks-20-mass-shootings-trnd/index.html>

⁶ “What We Learned on Day 5 of the Derek Chauvin Trial,” April 2, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/04/02/us/derek-chauvin-trial>

⁷ D. Cameron Murchison, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, “Mark 16:1-8: Pastoral Perspective,” 356.

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they did not do it. They could not allow themselves to hope because it would mean that the promises they made to Jesus and to God would still stand.

The cost of discipleship that Jesus outlines quite clearly in the Gospels would still apply to them if Jesus was alive. The women and the other disciples would need to look Jesus in the eye and bear his loving gaze as they looked at their deeds and misdeeds since his arrest. It is much more convenient to believe that Jesus is dead rather than alive. A living Jesus invites relationship and commitment, and a dead Jesus is buried in the tombs of their hearts. We can visit and mourn whenever it is convenient this way, and it costs them nothing in the present.

But a living God--a living Jesus--how he changes everything! Suddenly, the women realize that nothing is as they thought it was. They cannot go back into their former lives as if nothing has changed since they met Jesus. They cannot return home to their families as if they haven't changed. Nothing is the same. Jesus has transformed death on behalf of humanity, and God has raised him from the dead. Nothing about that reality says that they can go back to the way things were. And why would they? Life was more difficult, to be certain, as a disciple of Jesus, but life was also better. Mary, Salome, and Mary Magdalene had more agency and freedom in the Jesus movement than they ever did in their other lives. Authentic hope invites them to continue the life of discipleship in light of the resurrection. In other Gospel accounts, the women go straight to the disciples and tell them what they saw. They proclaim the good news of the resurrection to the others who are hiding and afraid. That is not what we get in the Gospel of Mark. We get to see the women wrestling, with how to respond, too, and with the cost of living into hope.

The Easter narrative extends the opportunity to each of us this morning to live into hope, too. Jesus keeps his promises. Jesus has risen from the dead, transforming death into life, and is waiting for us in Galilee. He wants us to come and meet him there, and wants us to tell others who are afraid that they can come out of the dark. We do not need to stay inside our tombs any longer. We do not need to sit in our shame or sadness. We do not need to hold on to bitterness and anger. We do not need to keep feeding our addictions or bad habits. Jesus offers us another way, a way that is harder, but better. It requires us to let go of the lies we believe about ourselves, about others, about the world around us. The way of authentic hope that Jesus invites us to accept sits squarely in the tension of the Easter story. Will we choose to believe life and death coexist within us?

We do not need to go back to 'the way things were' before the pandemic. There is no going back for any of us. Our world has changed. Like the disciples who cannot go back to the days before the crucifixion, we cannot go back to the

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world as we knew it. But the sun has continued to rise each day as we carry our mounting losses, and the sun will keep on rising. The sun is rising on a resurrection world, a world that holds both the darkness of the night and the light of the dawn. The sun has risen again, and will keep rising, again and again, shining brightly into the tombs of our lives. It is easier to let the dead remain dead, to let hope go, to bury our beliefs, to give up our dreams, and to treat God like a Magic 8 Ball. But that is not the resurrection story, and that is not the authentic hope that Jesus offers us.

The sun rises, no matter how we feel each day and no matter if we notice it. The sun will keep rising, and we can choose, each day, to live as if Jesus is alive. We can choose, each day, to live as disciples, even when we are not ready. Even when we cannot acknowledge that God is actively turning the world around.⁸ We can choose, each day, to face the cost of discipleship with courage and with love. Amen.

⁸ Paraphrase of Rev. T. Denise Anderson, “Mark 16:1-8,” *Sermon Planning Guide*, Again & Again Year B, A Sanctified Art, 21.