

Witnesses: Hope Revived (Mary)

John 20:1-18

April 16, 2017

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It has been said that a person can live 40 days without food, 3 days without water, 8 minutes without air – but only one second without hope. I'm not sure if that's true when it comes to food, water and air – but I know about hope. Without hope, all there is – is darkness. It is this immovable wall – a darkness beyond which we cannot see, a darkness that's all we can see. And that's where we meet Mary Magdalene this morning. The gospel of John tells us: **Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...** That's all she could see – darkness. This immovable wall of darkness. Alone in the garden. The stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away, and the body of Jesus was gone. Her first thought, which would have been my first thought, was that his body had been stolen. Nobody ran to the garden that morning to begin a countdown. All there was – was darkness.

Mary Magdalene was among the group that traveled to Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples. She watched as the crowd gathered with palm branches and hailed Jesus as king. What joy she felt that day as others finally saw in him what she already knew to be true. She was with Jesus that week when he went into the Temple courts and watched as he cast out the money changers who were taking advantage of the poor. She was there as Jesus taught in the Temple and as he challenged the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. Mary was there on Friday as Jesus was taken to the home of Pontius Pilate by the religious leaders who demanded execution. She was there when Pilate asked the crowd what to do and her heart must have been crushed when she heard they shout, "Crucify him." Mary was also part of the crowd that followed Jesus to Golgotha, the place of crucifixion. While all of the other disciples scattered, she stood at the cross with Mary his mother and two other women. For six hours, she watched and listened to his final words. The worst possible thing was happening and she was powerless to do anything. This was a man who was all about mercy, love, and forgiveness, and he was dying as a common criminal. She heard his final gasp. She watched as Jesus was taken down from the cross and carried to the garden tomb. And just before sunset, she watched as a stone was rolled in front of the tomb to seal the entrance. It was over. His life was over – and in so many ways, her life was over too. All she could see was darkness. There was no hope. And it felt like God was dead.

I wonder if that's what they were feeling last Sunday, Palm Sunday in Egypt, when terrorists attacked two churches, killing 44 and injuring more than 100. Do you ever listen to the news? There's darkness in this world. But we don't have to go Egypt to see the darkness. I've been with some of you at moments when your grief was so great you could not eat or sleep. You did not want to see another day. Mary Magdalene helps us see how real the moments of darkness are. Moments when darkness seems to prevail over light. When evil seems to prevail over good. When death seems to prevail over God.

As he hung on the cross, Jesus shows us what it looks like when life seems hopeless. He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To be in this place where all is dark and without hope – God knows what it's like. But what Mary doesn't know is that when Jesus was dead and buried, "while it was still dark" God was not finished yet. The worst thing is never the last thing. Early on Sunday morning, Mary went to the tomb. The stone has been moved but she doesn't think Jesus has been raised. People weren't raised from the dead any more often in the first century than they are in the twenty-first century. John Ortberg tells of a Sunday School teacher who asked her class what Jesus said when he appeared on Easter morning and one

child replied, “Ta da!” But John’s gospel tells us that Jesus was present and Mary could not see that. She is crying. Her grief is inconsolable. But then the man she thinks is the gardener says her name, “Mary.” She knows that voice. She would never forget that voice. And in that moment everything changes. It isn’t that her friend, Jesus, wasn’t dead after all, but in that moment she knew that good had triumphed over evil. When she saw that it was Jesus, she knew that love had conquered hate. Light had conquered darkness. Life had conquered death. Hope Revived.

Easter is the message of hope that shouts through history. Evil, hate, darkness will not triumph. And those who believe that have redefined their lives by this story. No matter how hard and messed up life gets, that’s not what prevails. God has proclaimed hurt and evil will not have the final word. Even the worst things we do to ourselves and to others will not be what ultimately defines us. Some of you are walking through dark places right now. Maybe your spouse has left and you can’t even imagine what tomorrow will be. Maybe you’ve lost a loved one, lost your job, lost your health, a relationship on the edge. You are walking through this place of darkness and you cannot see that it ends. But Easter says, that’s not what prevails. Hope will be revived.

Death is our common enemy. No one escapes. We do everything in our power to postpone that day. Last year we spent \$3.3 trillion on health care in this country. That’s more than \$10,000 for every man, woman and child, and a third of that is spent in the final year of a person’s life. We will do everything we can for one more week, one more day. Without faith, we end up holding on to everything we have, because that’s all there is. Last week, I received a note from one of our members. His mother is in hospice care and could die at any point. On Monday, his mother looked at him and said she had met his older sisters. It seemed odd, because he only has two brothers but then he was reminded that his mother had two miscarriages before he was born. On Tuesday, she told him, “Everyone is up here.” And each night she says, “Either I’ll wake up and see you, or I’ll wake up and see your Dad and Jesus.” Easter announces this life is not the end. And when we put our hope in Easter, we live differently. It’s not that we want to die, but we’re not afraid of it. It’s not goodbye, but see you later and when that day arrives we know we will be greeted by those who have gone before us.

C.S. Lewis wrote the Chronicles of Narnia – Have you read them – or maybe you’ve seen the Narnia movies? A series of 7 books written for children but with a message for adults. The heroes in stories are children who go off to the magical land of Narnia and Jesus shows up as a lion. And when you get to the final book in the series, the final chapter do any of you remember what happens? The children, the heroes of the story, die in a train crash. What kind of ending is that? It’s tragic, and it feels horrible – until you keep reading to the final paragraph: *The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories... But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*

What a beautiful picture rooted in this story of Jesus who died but rose from the grave. Contrast that image with the one offered by the 19th century French writer, Jules de Goncourt: “*Life is a nightmare between two nothings.*” Which is it? Is this life with all its joys and struggles only the beginning of the real story where every chapter is better than the one before, or is it a nightmare between two nothings. Is it a wall of darkness or is it just the beginning? For me, I choose Easter. It defines how I live. It gives me a mission. Jesus said to Mary: “Do not hold on to me... Go instead to tell others.”

Easter is not something we do once a year. We get dressed up, go to church, go to brunch afterwards, hide Easter eggs, and then we put everything away until next year. That's not really Easter. The Easter I'm talking about is taking the hope we have been given and then giving it to others. We come alongside others who are in a dark place and we walk with them. We do that this morning with one of the recipients of our Easter offering. In 2012, we commissioned a missionary to go to Kenya and create a ministry that did not exist in that country. After several mission trips to Kenya, there was this growing realization that there was an unmet need in that country – a culture where children who become pregnant usually through rape or incest are then discarded and the children of these children discarded. There was no hope, but it seemed God was calling this church to stand for hope and come alongside these children. And so, Imara International was started in Nanyuki, Kenya. Two years ago, a 15 year old, in her first trimester arrived at the Imara house. And through the staff of Imara, you came alongside her during her pregnancy – providing for her needs and allowing her to continue her education. She has a dream – one day she would like to be a nurse. Without Imara, that would not be possible. Her son was born 18 months ago. Medical care in Kenya is not what we take for granted here in the Twin Cities. They don't have neonatal intensive care units and when her son was born, it took 40 minutes to resuscitate him. He is severely disabled – cerebral palsy – in a culture where a child with disabilities is often left outside for the hyenas. Because a disabled child is a wall of darkness – a nightmare between two nothings – end his life before it gets worse. And the culture says the only reason he was born this way is because of the sinfulness of his mother. But Imara International is about hope. The child's name is Meshack. He is alive and growing, receiving therapy every week. He will always be disabled but he is doing far more than anyone thought possible. His mother has embraced her child and is learning how to be the mother her son needs her to be. She is excelling in school, still wanting to be a nurse. She has hope. In this 16 year old and her son, we see hope revived. Because you came alongside her – with hope.

What if every one of us left here today and saw our job as bringing hope – allowing the presence of God's love to be seen through you. What if the people in your family looked to you and saw hope, what the people in your school looked to you and saw hope, what if the people in your workplace looked to you and saw hope, what if the 1000 people that will worship with us this morning said I choose hope. Today is the beginning. The power of God's love is alive and will live through me and will define how I treat others. Easter is not simply a day, it is a choice we make: Because he lives, I can choose to live also.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of April 16, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, Easter was not a one-day event. Easter changed everything, for all time. Let it continue to shape and change us, our lives, the lives of those around us and the entire world, for the better. Give us ears to hear the ways that you call us and lives willing to follow you. Amen.

Monday, April 17

Scripture: John 20:1-10

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there.

He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Observation: Very early on Sunday, Mary, Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” found Jesus’ tomb empty. Notice her first report: “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” We’ll see this week that the gospels made it plain that none of the disciples were waiting hopefully for Jesus to rise from the dead. Mary simply wondered if “they” (grave robbers? the authorities?) had taken Jesus’ body.

Application: Mary went to the tomb “while it was still dark.” She didn’t expect to find Jesus alive, but she was eager to care for his body as soon as possible to express her devotion. How can you nurture a desire to go to Jesus first, even in times of darkness or discouragement?

Prayer: Loving Lord, when Mary first found the tomb empty, what had happened there went far beyond her imagination. Open my heart and mind to trust in the unimaginably good news of the empty tomb. Amen.

Tuesday, April 18

Scripture: John 20:11-18

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

Observation: Mary thought Jesus was the gardener. Symbolically, he was—Adam failed in the first garden (Genesis 3), but Jesus (the “second” Adam) would tend earth’s garden well (Romans 5:15-21). Mary didn’t recognize Jesus by sight, but it seems his beloved voice, the way he said her name, was unmistakable. Then Jesus sent Mary as the very first eyewitness to the risen Christ.

Application: Mary knew Jesus’ voice. She had listened carefully to what he said. How can you come to know the “sound” of Jesus’ voice? What practices and choices can make your relationship with Jesus personal, a link between your heart and his?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, for Mary just the sound of your voice saying her name turned darkness to light, despair to joy, in a flash. Give me ears to hear the ways that you call me by name. Amen.

Wednesday, April 19

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Observation: The oldest manuscripts we have of Mark's gospel end at 16:8. Some later manuscripts contain either a short or a longer ending (reflected in the footnotes in many English Bibles). We don't know if the abrupt ending was Mark's intention, or reflects an interruption or loss of what he wrote. But even as it stands, verse 6 said Mary and her companions had heard the good news: "He has been raised."

Application: Mark's resurrection story contained one vital extra detail. In Mark 16:7, the angel told Mary Magdalene and the other women, "Tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee." Peter, who had publicly denied even knowing Jesus, was specifically included by name. What does this tell you about Jesus' grace toward Peter? Can you trust Jesus to treat you the same way when you fail?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the most loving thing the women could think of to do was to complete your burial. But you had so much more in store for them—and for me. Lead me on to a life lived in the light of your resurrected life. Amen.

Thursday, April 20

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn't here, because he's been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, 'He's been raised from the dead. He's going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' I've given the message to you." With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there."

Observation: Having set down Jesus' prediction that he would rise after three days (Matthew 16:21), we might expect Matthew to say, "So on the third day the disciples gathered, eager to greet the risen Lord." Not even close! He said, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to

look at the tomb.” These very real women he wrote about felt “great fear and excitement,” a reaction much like most of us would have to an unexpected encounter with the supernatural.

Application: Matthew’s account of the women’s reaction—“with great fear and excitement”—carried a ring of truth. Try to put yourself in their shoes: what is there in the mystery and power of God that stirs a certain kind of fear in your heart? Have you ever had the sense that following God might cause huge changes in your life? What is there about sensing that God is at work through your life that fills you with the greatest joy?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you called your first followers, and now me as I follow in their footsteps, to a great adventure. Help me be honest about both the great fear and the excitement your call creates. Help me conquer the fear, and follow you. Amen.

Friday, April 21

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Human One must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

Observation: Even Jesus’ death didn’t dim the women’s loyalty. They returned to his tomb “very early in the morning on the first day of the week.” They didn’t find his body, but did find two men in gleaming clothes who said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn’t here, but has been raised.” They reported this to the eleven, and again we see the bluntly honest way the gospels reported what happened. “Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn’t believe the women.”

Application: These accounts make it clear that no one expected to see Jesus alive that Sunday. They were gripped by preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would be and do, and of what death meant. In what ways can preconceived ideas make it harder for you to trust the Bible’s testimony? When have you found greater joy and peace after letting God overturn some fixed idea of yours?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, whatever else your disciples were, they were not gullible and naïve. It took a lot to convince them you were alive again—but once convinced, not one of them ever gave up his or her faith. Give me a steadfast heart like theirs. Amen.

Saturday, April 22

Scripture: Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterward, Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

Observation: Mary Magdalene has come to play such a large role in speculative popular fiction about Jesus that it's a bit of a surprise to see how relatively small (yet vital) a role she played in the gospels. Luke 8 is the only mention of her name before Jesus' cross and resurrection. It was extremely brief, yet it showed that she had good reason to become one of Jesus' deeply committed disciples.

Application: At times, as in this reading, the gospels give almost no details. When they do, the details may differ, and we wonder which is most accurate. But on the big story, they all agree. Frederick Buechner wrote, "When Jesus came, the whole course of history was changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact ... all the way down the twenty centuries since [Jesus' life,] there have been countless different kinds of people who in countless different kinds of ways ... have been grasped by him, caught up into his life ... in this man, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, to give a new kind of life to anybody who turns toward him in faith, even to such as you and me." Jesus changed Mary Magdalene's life for the better. In what ways has he changed your life? How will you remain open to let him continue changing your life for the better?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Easter was not a one-day event—it changed everything, for all time. Let it continue to shape and change me, and my world, for the better. Amen.