

“BECAUSE HE LIVES”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Every year on Easter Sunday, we hear the Gospel lesson from John that Mike just read that begins with these words, “Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.” It’s interesting that John takes note of that, that “it was still dark.” I think he meant to tell us something. I think there’s a story behind those few words.

If it was still dark, it was still nighttime. If it was still dark, most people were at home asleep in their beds. If it was still dark, and Mary was up and out of her house going to the tomb – well, that meant that Mary couldn’t sleep.

And it’s no wonder. She was stricken with grief over Jesus’ death, and if you’ve ever experienced the death of someone dear to you, you know that sleep is elusive at times. Your mind won’t shut off. Your heart won’t stop hurting. Your

imagination, your fears run away with you – and rather than risk the nightmares, you get up and get going.

No doubt, Mary's mind wouldn't shut off and her heart wouldn't stop hurting. Jesus was everything to her. Do you remember her story? Mary had had a troubled life before she met him. She was possessed by demons, she is reported to have had a bit of loose living in her background, she was aimless and groundless.

And then she met Jesus, and he turned her life around. He healed her of the demons, he accepted her for who she was, baggage and all. He set her on her feet again and counted her as a dear friend. He made her feel like she mattered, like she was worth something, that life could be good, and the longer she was around him, the better life got.

She was blessed to look on as he walked the roads, talked to people, healed them, fed them, gave them hope. She saw other lives changed just as hers had been. She knew about other women who had new life because of him – the woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well – so many women who came to realize their worth because of him.

Life was so good, and then, it began to change, because Mary watched as people were out to get Jesus. She watched in horror as the people who were threatened by him did their worst to take him down. And then she watched in absolute horror as they did just that.

No matter how she or others protested, no matter what they did to try to help, nothing worked. Evil was having its way, and on the worst day of her life, she watched evil triumph, as her beloved Savior was nailed to a cruel cross and hung to die at Calvary. He was abused, he was laughed at, he was jeered, and after suffering for hours, he finally breathed his last. It was over.

When Jesus died, Mary Magdalene must have felt dead inside. Everything that had brought hope into her life was gone. All the promise, all the joy, all the good things that might have happened, dead and gone. It was an awful , awful day and now, just a few days later, she can't sleep and she goes to the tomb. She just needs to be there, to be near his broken body.

Like I said when I started, every year on Easter we hear about Mary Magdalene, and every year our heart breaks for her. But friends, I don't think

there's ever been an Easter, when perhaps we understand more fully what she was going through, than this one today.

Just as life pulled the rug out from under Mary Magdalene and changed everything she knew to be good and true, so too in many ways has life done that to us of late. I know I've been having trouble sleeping many nights. The news is haunting. The statistics frightening. Normal life is no more.

We too come to the grave of Jesus on Easter morning bewildered. We feel deep loss – the loss of freedom, the loss of jobs, the loss of human touch, the loss of worshiping together in church – the list goes on and on. We grieve the loss of thousands upon thousands to this insidious virus. We grieve the toll it's taking on so many – particularly medical personnel, first responders, bosses who have to let people go, and the millions of newly unemployed.

Our hearts are heavy and, at times, it feels like we're traveling in the dark like Mary Magdalene did. Sadly, when she arrived at the tomb, it only got worse. For when she got there, she was shocked to see that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. That had to be the lowest moment of all for her – to think

that they couldn't even let her Savior rest in death – they had stolen his body – the ultimate degradation – the last straw.

Well, you know what happened next – she ran and got two of Jesus' disciples and brought them back to see what she had seen. They came, they looked and then they left her alone again. And all she could do was weep.

When she looked back into the tomb, she saw angels and they asked her why she was weeping. She explained to them that someone had taken Jesus' body and she didn't know where he was.

And then, still weeping, she turned around, and was startled to see a man standing there. Well, who else could it be, she thought, but a groundskeeper, a gardener. He too, like the angels, asked her why she was weeping, and she thought well maybe he had taken the body, and she asked him just that.

Then the man answered her, not answering her question, but just saying one word – her name. “Mary.” The gospel writer doesn't say that she gasped, but she

had to have, because in that instant when he spoke her name, she knew it was Jesus, her Lord and Savior – alive, standing right there in front of her! Alive!

All she wanted to do was grab him and hug him to be sure she wasn't seeing things, but he prevented her from doing that. Instead, he invited her to go and tell others that evil and death and enemies had not won! He was alive!

And so she did. She told whoever would listen to her, I truly believe, for the rest of her days about the risen Savior – how no matter how dire it looked, no matter how the forces of evil had tried, God raised Christ from the dead and life, for everyone, began again, better than ever before!

Oh dear friends, on this Easter Sunday, I pray that we will remember that her story is our story, too! Let me suggest that we do that today in three ways.

First, remember that Jesus came to Mary and spoke her name in the time of her deepest despair. She had her most profound encounter with Christ in her time

of deepest pain. He appeared at the very worst moment of her life, and lifted her up from the pit of despair.

Oh, please hear that, and know that the risen Christ is right here with us too in our time of despair. He is here to hold us up when fear threatens to take us down, to reassure us when dire predictions come at us almost every single day, to be our companion when we can't be with the ones dearest to us. The risen Christ is right here with us in the midst of this pandemic to lift us above our fears and keep hope alive in our hearts.

Secondly, may we remember that on that Easter morning Mary Magdalene went looking for something – and as she did she saw signs. She saw a rolled-away stone, she saw angels in white – all pointing to a risen Savior.

Dear friends, signs of God's love in Christ are everywhere, and we need to lift up our heads through the darkness of our present struggles and see them. Lift up your head and see Christ alive in the thousands and thousands of doctors, nurses, technicians, first responders, and so many more caring for those stricken by the coronavirus. They are the hands and feet of the risen Christ.

Lift up your head and see families and friends caring for each other in creative ways during this time of painful separation.

Lift up your head and see people doing whatever they can to lift spirits – people like Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood singing to us from their home, Dolly Parton reading to children on Thursday nights, people posting really creative and fun videos while they're stuck at home. All of them are bringing moments of joy in a time of trial. They are gifts from God, signs of the risen Savior.

Oh, I could go on and on. Friends, be like Mary Magdalene. In the midst of this present darkness, lift up your head and look for signs of the risen Christ – they're all around you!

Finally, let me invite all of us to remember that for the rest of her life Mary Magdalene was never the same. She lived life in a whole new way. She was changed by the experience of having her heart wrenched away, and then having the joy of the resurrected Christ fill it to overflowing. Everything must have been new in her eyes, every situation filled with possibility and opportunity, every challenge conquerable because of what she had experienced at Easter.

Friends, may Easter do that for us as well, this year especially. May the truth of Christ's resurrection give us new eyes to see and new ways to live, especially in these days.

One pastor put it so well, when she wrote this, inviting us to never go back to where we were before this pandemic struck. "Back before when we took for granted the touch of a neighbor or a friend. Back when we forgot to pause to see and celebrate those who make our lives possible: grocery shelf stockers, hospital staff who mop the floors, truck drivers who keep bringing in toilet paper which still seems to disappear as fast as it hits the shelves. Indeed (she continues), do we ever want to forget again the preciousness of lives where one was not forced to constantly wonder/worry if a pandemic will make its presence known too close to home? Don't you hope that we will never again take for granted the seemingly simple gift of being able to gather in classrooms, in sanctuaries, over lunch out with a friend? And more than all of this, of course, how can we now ever forget how very connected we are to one another – that looking out for the weakest and the poorest means we are tending us all?" (On-line, Janet Hunt, "A Holy Week Like No Other," 3/29/20)

Dear friends, this Easter, may we receive the good news of Christ's resurrection like never before, because we need it like never before. If God could

raise Christ from death, what can he not do? Knowing that, we can get through anything.

So, let us sing now, Mary Magdalene's song, "In the Garden." May it be yours today. May you know that "he walks with you, and he talks with you, and he tells you that you are his own." May you share that joy.

And then, as we finish the service, lift your voice and sing with Easter confidence those words so precious to all of us, "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone, because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living, just because he lives."

Friends, in the midst of all our sorrow and sadness right now, let us rise up and sing with Easter confidence and joy – for Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, and all will yet be well! Hallelujah! Amen!

