

“TURN AROUND! HE’S RIGHT BEHIND YOU!”

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Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

One Easter Sunday, a church probably not unlike this one, had a Sunrise Service. It was set for 6:30 a.m. and as the time drew near, the pastor was getting increasingly nervous, because the organist had not arrived. The clock ticked away – still no organist. Finally, at 6:30, he called her cell phone to see if she was on her way. No, in fact, she wasn’t – she was still in bed – she had overslept, but when she got his call she leapt out of bed, threw on some clothes and got there 30 minutes late, just before the service ended!

Fast forward – a year later. Same service time, same pastor, same organist. Only this time the phone call from pastor to organist came at 5:30 a.m.! It went like this: “Marge, I’m calling to tell you that Christ is risen and you’d better be too!” (On-line, Sermonsearch.com)

Christ is risen, and we have all arisen from our beds to come together here to celebrate that great good news! We have come to be with family and friends, to hear the glorious music, to see the beautiful flowers, to hear again that magnificent story of hope and promise from the Gospel of John that we just heard! We have come here this morning, and it is all good, all promising, all hopeful!

But, it was not that way as dawn broke on that first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene, the one who rose first from her bed that morning was filled with anything but hope. She was devastated by the death of Jesus – absolutely devastated. Everything that was good and decent was wiped away on a cruel cross at Calvary. All of the hope that Jesus had stirred up in her life was obliterated by his suffering and death. All of the good things that He had said and done for so many were a distant memory – wiped away by the evil things that had been done to Him. This man who had done so much for her life, this man who meant the world to her, this man who had literally brought her back to life in all its fullness, was dead and gone, and nothing would ever be the same again. The bottom had fallen out of her world, and she had no earthly idea what she was going to do.

There are some people in our world today, this very morning, who know exactly how Mary Magdalene was feeling. There’s a father who had to take his daughter to a rehab center for treatment for drug addiction, an addiction so bad

that she actually took her baby daughter with her when she went to get drugs from her dealer. Her father watches this child now, while he prays that this time will be the time his daughter is healed.

And there's a family who is staring at a stack of bills on their kitchen table trying to pick out which ones they can pay, and which creditors they can hope to put off for yet another month. They're all working multiple jobs, and still the bills are coming in faster than their income. Hope for them is as meager as their paychecks.

There are people all around us who are desperately lonely even in the midst of crowded lives. Something is missing in their life, and though they put on a brave front, they feel all alone.

And too many people have literally felt the bottom dropping out of their world because sickness has come into their lives. Life has become a whirl of tests and appointments and treatments and questions. And they don't stop for long, because if they do, they struggle with the "what if's?"

A lot of people today know how Mary Magdalene was feeling on that first Easter morning – they know the emptiness, the despair, the sadness and fear that wants to take your very breath away. They know what it was like for her to get up, almost in a fog, and make her way out the door of her home – almost mechanically. She didn't know what else to do, so she made her way to the tomb, the last place she saw Jesus before He was laid to rest. She just needed to be near Him.

Nothing could have prepared her for the shock of seeing the great huge stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. I'm actually a little surprised that the scripture doesn't say that she just collapsed, right there on the spot.

Still, she was deeply affected by what she saw, and in a panic, she ran to get help. I mean, all she could surmise was that the horrible people who had killed Jesus, were still at it – now, they had stolen His body – a final indignity! So she ran and got Peter and another disciple, told them what she had seen, and all three of them ran back to the tomb.

The scripture says that the men arrived first, looked inside, drew their own conclusions, and then went back home. But Mary couldn't. She stood rooted in that spot weeping. Finally, no doubt after taking a deep breath, she bent over and looked into the tomb, and there she saw two angels. They asked her why she was weeping, and she told them her story – that her Lord had been laid in that tomb, and now He was gone, and she didn't know where He was.

One preacher wrote something very interesting about this moment in time. She wrote: "I wonder if Mary felt a momentary flash of irritation (at the angels'

question)? I wonder if she felt like saying, ‘Well, angels, why do you think I’m weeping? I’m weeping over the crucifixion of my most cherished hope in life. My eyes are wet with tears of the bereaved. Why do you think I’m weeping?’”

She continues: “I have a theory that the angels, while she’s explaining why she’s weeping are pointing behind her as if to say ‘Turn around, turn around!’ I think they have come to give directions, after all, to a resurrected Lord who, from now on, is always standing right behind her, whose presence doesn’t depend on whether she feels Him there or not, whether she’s ready or not.” (On-line, “Ready or Not,” Alyce M. McKenzie, 4/17/11)

Blessedly Mary did turn around, and when she did she saw someone else standing outside of the tomb, a man, whom she figured to be the gardener (who else would be in the garden at the crack of dawn?) He asked her the same thing the angels asked her – “Woman, why are you weeping?” Again, she told her story, and asked him if he had taken Jesus’ body.

The man’s answer was one word – it was her name – “Mary” – and when He said it, suddenly, in that instant, life changed forever for Mary and for all of us. Because suddenly in that second, she knew it was Jesus, she knew He was alive, He was standing right in front of her, death hadn’t taken Him away, evil hadn’t ended it all, He was alive!

And He is alive this day! We turn around, and He is behind us! We turn around, and He is beside us! We turn around, and He is in front of us leading us into the future! He is alive! Death did not defeat Him! Evil did not defeat Him! Sadness and sorrow did not have the final word! He lives!

And because He lives, we live too now in a whole new way. As one pastor put it, “we stop believing in the grave, and hold fast to the resurrection instead.” (Matt Fitzgerald, “Thunderous Yes,” *The Christian Century*, 4/2/14, p. 11) And that changes everything – how we look at life, and how we look at death.

That same pastor went on to say, “God has won every battle for you. Death has been defeated. Now, God wants you to stop fighting. Live easy.” (Ibid.)

Stop fighting. Live easy! Do not let the things of life get to you and take away your joy. Sorrow and sighing will end. It’s going to be okay. Even death will be defeated – it is not the end, but the beginning.

Henry Van Dyke once wrote something powerful about death. It goes like this: “I am standing on the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength, and I stand and watch until at last she hangs like a speck of white cloud

just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says, ‘there she goes!’

‘Gone where?’ Gone from my sight – that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and span as she was when she left my side and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of her destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at the moment when someone at my side says, ‘There she goes!’ there are other eyes watching her coming and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, ‘Here she comes! Here she comes! on the other shore.’ (Henry van Dyke, *Parable of Immortality*, James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul That Only God Can Fill*, “Eternal Life in God,” p. 60)

Friends, the Good News of Easter is that death does not have the final word, neither does evil or hate or sadness or sorrow. The Good News of Easter is that Christ is alive, and because He lives, we can face tomorrow – whatever tomorrow brings – because He is behind us, and before us, and always with us.

So I want to close by telling you what the power of Easter looks like. We saw it this week in a town just outside of Kansas City. As you know, last Sunday there was a terrible shooting outside the Jewish Community Center in Overland Park, Kansas. Three people were killed at the hands of a dreadfully disturbed man. Two of those killed were a grandfather and his grandson – who both happened to be members of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, a church that I went to for a seminar a few years ago, along with others on the staff, and the pastor of which is Adam Hamilton, whose name is familiar to many of you, because I’ve quoted him a lot, but also because we use a lot of his Bible studies around here.

At any rate, on Sunday evening, just hours after the killings, a prayer vigil was held at the church and hundreds of people turned out to pray. Clergy led the meeting and then others were invited to the microphone to speak. At one point, a woman came forward, dressed in a hooded red sweatshirt. Another woman came with her holding on to her arm, offering support.

The woman in the sweatshirt began to speak. She thanked everyone for coming, and then she said, “My name is Vicky Corporan. I am the daughter of the gentleman who was killed, and the mother of the boy who was killed.” When she said that, an audible gasp came up from the crowd of now, mostly crying persons in attendance.

She went on. She told them how much she appreciated them being there, and then she began to talk about her father and her son. She had come upon the crime scene even before the police and ambulance arrived, and she said she knew immediately they were both in heaven, and in heaven together.

She told them how it was that her father had come to be there with her son that afternoon, that he was helping them out while she and her husband had to be somewhere else, and her mother somewhere else as well. She said, “we were having life,” and then she added these words, “and I want you all to know we’re going to have more life, and I want you to have more life too. Love one another.” (On-line, Kansas City Star, 4/14/14)

How could she do that? How could she stand up just hours after her father and her son were brutally murdered and say such powerful and loving things? How? Because of Easter. Because Jesus lives. Because she knows that death and evil do not have the final word. And because she knows that she is never alone – all she has to do it turn around and Jesus is there, carrying her through it all.

That’s the Good News of Easter, my friends. Jesus is alive, and He’s here, and all you have to do it turn around, He’s behind you and before you, and always with you – to walk with you through every day of your life. No matter what – when our hearts are broken in two, or they’re overflowing with joy – no matter what – the risen Christ is with us! Thanks be to God!

Amen.