

The sermon for April 12th, 2020 – Easter Sunday – in the midst of the Covid-19 quarantine – based upon John 20:1-18 entitled "The Risen Christ in an Unfair World"

It is striking that in all four Gospels it is women who are the first witnesses to the empty tomb -- that Jesus was alive again. In those days if you were going to make up a story about somebody rising from the dead, you certainly wouldn't have the primary witnesses be women. In the eyes of their culture women weren't considered reliable – they weren't allowed to testify in court. So it has the ring of authenticity that the Gospels have women discover the miracle.

Jesus always treated women with love and respect. In John's Gospel, there is just one woman – Mary Magdalene, with whom Jesus seems to have had a particularly close relationship – that goes to the tomb early on Easter morning. All alone, she reminds us of all the people in this particular moment in time who are forced to live all alone. If you are such a person, perhaps you can feel a particular identification with Mary's story.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,

The resurrection story begins in darkness. Seeds break open and sprout in the darkness of the soil. Birth takes place in the darkness of a mob. Don't be afraid of the dark. Good things happen in darkness.

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.'

Notice that Mary wasn't expecting the resurrection. In fact, having experienced the worst that we human beings are capable of -- the murder of her beloved Jesus whose heart was full only of love – Mary's first thought when she discovers that the tomb is empty is that one more horrible injustice has taken place. Grave robbers have come and stolen her beloved master's body! What a cruel thing to do to people who are mourning. This too reminds us of the compounded grief of people in this time of social obligatory social isolation in which people cannot gather in the presence of their beloved's body to grieve.

³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards 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.

Two men look into an empty tomb. Peter like Mary, sees only evidence of a crime. The beloved disciple, we are told looked and "believed." What he believes is unclear, because John goes on to tell us that he did not yet "understand", but he seems to believe that in the midst of sorrow God can be trusted.

Faith comes mysteriously to people at different stages in life. If you are feeling as though faith is altogether out of reach for you, let this story open you to the possibility that the mustard seed of faith may be about to unexpectedly sprout in your life.

¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?'

"Woman, why are you weeping?" When I've read these words in the past I think I took them to mean, "Woman, you shouldn't be weeping." But if that's what Jesus and the angels meant they would have said simply, "Don't cry."

To my ear there seems to be a validation of Mary's grief – and our own – in this question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" It's an invitation to delve deeply into our griefs. It's okay to feel very sad sometimes, especially when you've lost someone you love.

When someone is crying because they have lost somebody they love very much, one of the worst things we can say is: "Don't cry. They're in a better place."

The fact that they are in a better place may well be true, but crying is a good and proper response to grief. Jesus himself wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. "Tears are the lubricant of the Holy Spirit."

It is also striking that in John's Gospel that it is Mary Magdalene -- the one who is most deeply feeling her grief -- the one who isn't trying to find something to distract herself from her pain -- to whom Jesus first appears.

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.'

Mary can look right at Jesus and does not recognize him.

In a certain sense, we do this all the time. When I say each Sunday that newcomers are "Jesus in disguise", I really mean that. It is so easy for us to look at somebody and not recognize the holy mystery and miracle that is their existence. We look at somebody and see merely the cashier, or somebody walking their dog, or somebody who we've seen every day of our lives and no longer believe that anything they say or do can surprise us.

One of my prayers for this difficult time we are going through is that it will be an opportunity for God to open our eyes to the wonder, the mystery, the miracle that is life. To recognize Jesus in all his many disguises.

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...'

"Do not hold on to me." There is a strange resonance to these words with the present moment in which we find ourselves. Mary isn't permitted to touch Jesus -- to do what she most wants to do which is to give him a big hug. How we are missing the capacity to touch the people we love.

I hear two things in this: First, although the resurrection is indeed the best news, the most important news, it doesn't make everything "right" in this world. Mary is given profound joy, but the joy doesn't end all sorrow. Sorrow and joy exist side by side in this life.

The other thing I hear in this is Jesus responding to Mary's instinct to want to go back to the way things were. We hear that desire expressed a lot these days, don't we? We just want things "to go back to the way they were."

But the way things were wasn't working. There was a kind of pettiness, superficiality, divisiveness to the way we were living life. We were forgetting what really mattered – that love is why we are made. And not a clingy kind of love – but a love that truly nourishes one another – a love that wants only the best for one another.

But God is always working in this world to bring forth something new, something better.

'Do not hold 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." ' ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is why we are talking about Jesus two thousand years later.

Mary – and the disciples – experienced such a powerful joy that it pulled them out of a deep, dark cavern of grief and despair.

I've heard people say, "This epidemic we're going through – with all the suffering and death it has afflicted on so many innocent lives – it makes you me doubt God."

This is an understandable feeling, but it also indicates that we haven't been paying attention to the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. We haven't been listening to the story that leads up to Easter.

It's so important to hear Easter in context. The most loving man who ever lived – a truly innocent man – is tortured, and nailed to a cross.

It isn't fair.

The world is broken. Life isn't fair.

We want to believe that it is, because if it is we can have some measure of control over life: Play by the rules, and we'll get a happy outcome.

But life isn't fair, and we're seeing that so clearly in this virus that is inflicting so much pain, death and grief on so many "innocent" people. We're not in control.

There's a young Duke Divinity School professor named Kate Bowler. She's a church historian and her specialty was the study of the distinctly American

phenomenon known as the "Prosperity Gospel." There are lots of churches in America where a distortion of the Gospel is preached that says in essence that if you have enough faith, if you believe right, pray right, think right God will bless you with everything your heart desires: wealth, health, and success.

Kate didn't think she believed in this gospel herself but was fascinated by its powerful appeal. She recognized that "prosperity Gospel" looks past the cross – the clearest sign that this life isn't fair.

At the age of 35 some pretty horrible suffering suddenly overtook Kate's life. At the time, she was in really wonderful place in life. She was married to a man she loved dearly and was the mother of a beautiful two year old son she adored. She had her dream job teaching at a Divinity School.

And then out of the blue she was diagnosed with incurable stage four colon cancer. It sent her into more grief, more pain, more uncertainty than she had ever could have imagined. She realized that deep down that she clung to her own form of the prosperity Gospel. She wanted life to be fair so she could be in control. But it wasn't and she couldn't control what her future would hold.

Remarkably, nearly five years later Kate Bowler is alive and still teaching. She has been through more surgeries than she can count -- lots of rounds of chemotherapy.

She wrote a best seller book with the title, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other Lies I Have Loved.)*

No, life isn't fair. God doesn't send us cancer and epidemics for a "reason", God doesn't want children to starve and families to lose their homes. God didn't send us this epidemic as punishment or to teach us a lesson.

God doesn't send such horrors towards us for a "reason", but sometimes such things do provide the opportunity for us to recognize truths we previously were missing. Such was the case for Kate.

She describes how at a low point in her journey with cancer, when she was sure she was going to die she was surprised by what she discovered herself feeling. She didn't feel angry. She felt loved. Deeply, profoundly loved – this profound sense of being held by loving arms. Of being safe in the deepest sense of the word.

The feeling stayed with her for a time -- for months -- but eventually it faded. But the memory gives her confidence that when it does come time for her to die – whenever that will be -- she will feel that same loving presence – the mystery of God – holding her again, leading her safely home.

And knowing this truth, she wouldn't want to go back.

I listened to an interview of Kate on Terri Gross' "Fresh Air." I was struck by one of the things she said:

"It felt like cancer was like this secret key that opened up this whole new reality. And part of the reality was the realization that your own pain connects you to the pain of other people. I don't know. Maybe I was just a narcissist before. But like all of a sudden, I realized how incredibly fragile life is for almost everyone. And then I noticed things like... the tired mom in the grocery store who's just like struggling to get the thing off the top shelf while her kid screams, and you notice how very tired that person looks at the bus stop. And then, of course, all the people in the cancer clinic around me. The extraordinary tenderness of the man with his wife the cancer patient.

"It felt like I was cracked open, and I could see everything really clearly for the first time."

Christ has risen. This truth doesn't deliver us from the experience suffering and grief in this life. But the testimony of Mary Magdalene echoes down through the centuries inviting us to listen for the risen Lord calling each of us by name, and opening our eyes to the deep connection we all have together through the great mystery of God's love which is stronger than the power of death.