

Sermon for Easter 2019
John 20: 1-18
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

May the Spirit of the Risen Lord Jesus be heard in these words and felt in our hearts. Amen.

Weeping and Laughing

"Jesus took bread and gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'"

"My soul is overwhelmed to the point of sorrow. Stay here and keep watch with me."

"*Abba*, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

"Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"

"Then they spit on his face and slapped him. Others hit him with their fists."

"A large number of people followed Jesus, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.'"

"When Jesus saw his mother near the cross, he said to her, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple standing by, 'Here is your mother.'"

"Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

No one could write a more powerful story, not the most successful novelist, not the most brilliant historian, not the most lyrical poet. We know from these passages that what sounds like the end of the story is really its beginning. When it seems like the Power of Darkness has been victorious, we trust in the rest of the story: in the assurance that one death has conquered all Death and that the Resurrection is not the final word, but the new word full of new beginnings. No matter how many times we hear The Greatest Story Ever Told, the story of the suffering, sacrifice, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, it always ends in life.

Mary Magdalene modeled that lesson one Sabbath morn centuries ago, a lesson so vital that we hear it proclaimed again and again, year after year: *life is happening even when things around us look dead*. Despite all the various women in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John who take part in the discovery of the empty tomb, only Mary Magdalene's story happens between the two drastically different messages she takes to

the disciples. The first message is one of painful desperation, as Mary weeps, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and I don't know where they have put him!" (20:2), and the second message is one of incredulous joy, as she laughs, "I have seen the Lord!" (20:18).

The fact of life, and the story of the New Testament, is that if we haven't yet experienced the tomb, we will, because it is a necessary part of the journey to Resurrection. But the good news, the Easter news, is that the tomb is not permanent: *life is happening even when things around us look dead.*

Some of us this morning may even now be living in the shadows of the tomb. We weep because we cannot understand why the journeys of our lives, despite our constant striving to control them, do not run smoothly and on schedule. We weep, like Mary because it is so hard to see the reality of the spring wildflower underneath the debris of winter.

Mary had lost her Lord, the person she gave up everything to follow. Her tomb time consisted of sorrow, fear, confusion, and intense worry, "Where is the Lord?", but let's notice that she did not give up or give in. She did not throw up her hands and say, "Well, Jesus has left me!" and decide to quit believing because she couldn't understand what had happened or explain it. Instead, she waited. Just as Mary Magdalene stayed by the cross, she stayed at the tomb.

Because of her action, because she did not give into despair or run away, "I have seen the Lord!" becomes the second part of Mary's Easter experience. And so she quickly runs, laughing with joy and astonishment, to tell the disciples. Weeping and Laughing. Life was happening even when everything around her looked dead. That is the power and the reality of Resurrection.

But for this story to have any real meaning to us, it must intersect somehow with our own lives. And so I will share another true story with you, one within my own experience.

Some years ago, when our son was a senior at Auburn, his good friend since high school, Wade, was killed there. Wade, a goofy, good-natured kid, with a penchant for mischief--and including our son in it--was nearing graduation when he and his roommate started rough-housing at their apartment, like young men will do. While wrestling, the roommate looped his arm around Wade's neck, totally unaware, as was everyone else until the autopsy, that Wade had an abnormality that weakened the artery in his neck, and he died instantly from the pressure of his friend's arm. Wade was twenty.

That senseless death was enough to weep about, but Wade's mother was a widow, raising Wade and his younger sister. Her husband, Wade's father, had died suddenly from an allergic reaction to bee stings when both children were young. She had now lost a husband and a son to accidents, to things that might have been prevented except for being

in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a devastating loss for the family and their friends.

No one would have blamed Wade's mother if, in her shocking loss, she had chosen to roll the rock back over the tomb. No one would have blamed her if she had decided to take her daughter and run away. No one would have blamed her if she had expected the roommate to face the consequences, whatever they might be. Except that Wade's mother was a believer. Except that Wade's mother was an Easter person.

As soon as she could get to Auburn, this woman went to see the roommate and his parents, who we can imagine were also in shock and sorrow and fear. She told this other young man that she held no blame against him. She told his parents she would do whatever she could to keep the State from pressing manslaughter charges. In fact, this grieving mother with her broken heart even went before the District Attorney and informed him that she would not press any charges, and she asked the State to do the same. After some deliberation, he agreed.

We might think that was enough to ask of any injured party, but Wade's mother did even more. Knowing the guilt and remorse that the roommate felt, she asked him to be one of her son's pallbearers, instead of letting him sit there at the funeral in embarrassment and shame. Could any of us do the same, watch six young handsome college kids carry our son's coffin up the church aisle to the hearse and to the grave, one of them being the person responsible for that death? But she did that. She was an Easter person.

In Jesus's last words to his disciples, he reminds them that the world will only know they are his disciples by their actions of love. Actions, not words, make the Gospel alive. My son and I witnessed the truth of Jesus' reminder the day of that funeral. After Wade's coffin was lowered in the grave, this mother, perhaps all of forty years old, went over to the weeping roommate and gathered him in her arms. This grieving mother who should have collapsed in someone else's arms embraced this broken young man, and they both wept. Neither my son nor I have ever, ever forgotten that moment.

Resurrection is not about a yearly tradition, new clothes, or a Honey-baked ham. *It is not about the okay getting better, but about the dead coming back to life, which is quite different.* Wade's mother literally resurrected this young man's life through her act of forgiveness. She set him free. And, she also resurrected her own. Only by reaching out to him in his grief and remorse could she ever walk that dark night of the soul through her own. Only by allowing him the opportunity to laugh again, could she ever laugh again.

And she did laugh again. A few years later, she met a British gentleman, and she has been living in England for some time. Her daughter married and has children and visits frequently. Though there will always be scars, like the scars on Jesus' hands and feet, the family found new life. Resurrection happens.

"The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out," Jesus said during his ministry. Hundreds of years before that, Isaiah wrote, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine" (43:1). This morning, just as Jesus called Mary, just as he walked with Wade's mother, the Resurrected Jesus is calling each of us by name. He is calling us to recognize him in whatever emptiness we may find ourselves. He is assuring us that he is the Life, that he knows us by name, that he is Present, and that Resurrection happens, not just in the next life, but in this one.

Wherever you find yourselves spiritually this Easter morning, whatever your life situations are at this very moment, hear the Good News! *Life is happening even when things around us look dead.* Jesus desires to share a marvelous moment with you, a moment in which you hear him say your name because he gave himself for you. Today is a day for us to look into our own tombs, our hearts, and release whatever blocks our view of Christ, whatever prevents our joy, so we, too, can be resurrected, so we, too, can meet Jesus.

For those suffering from the guilt of sin, Jesus wants you to hear his assurance of forgiveness.

For those facing death of any kind, Jesus wants you to hear the promise of eternal life.

For those trapped in mourning, Jesus wants to give you proof of joy.

For those feeling deserted or overwhelmed by life's circumstances, Jesus wants you to feel his presence and love.

For those feeling lifeless, Jesus wants you to receive the gift of new life.

For those who are apathetic or lukewarm about their faith, Jesus continues to call to your name.

For those experiencing illness, Jesus wants you to feel his constant presence.

And for those full of joy and thanksgiving this day, Jesus rejoices with you!

This Easter story, this truth, is why we are here together this morning. Today is a day of joy, a time to laugh, because Jesus Christ has fled the tomb in order to reside in our hearts. Resurrection is not something to be remembered once a year, but something to be lived every day of our lives. Resurrection happens, and we are Easter people because Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Thanks be to God.