

“Easter Hope”

John 20:1-18

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I suspect it was a restless night for Mary Magdalene. It is hard to sleep when your heart is broken.

It is obvious she was anxious to return to the tomb where Jesus was buried. She could not even wait until the sun came up but left her house while it was still dark, which was as much a reflection of her spirit as the time of day.

She had just lived through a week filled with surprises and was probably longing for a time of peace and quiet at the center of her grief. Surely nothing unusual would happen at this hour to interfere with her plans. Little did she know it would.

She arrived at the tomb only to discover the stone at the entrance had been rolled away. To her dismay, Jesus' body was missing, which broke her heart even more. She assumed his body had been stolen or deliberately moved by the authorities.

How could anyone be so insensitive and cruel? Hadn't they done enough to this man she loved so dearly? Would this drama never end? No, it would not, and in the end she would be glad.

She did the only thing she knew to do at that time. She ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple what she had discovered. Immediately, they ran to the tomb to find things as she described. Without any answers they returned home, but Mary lingered at the tomb.

As Mary stood weeping outside the empty tomb, she had an encounter with two angels and a man whom she thought to be the gardener. Both asked her why she was weeping, and she told them she was disturbed because someone had taken the body of her Lord. She even volunteered to retrieve it if she was told where to go. As it turned out, she did not need to go anywhere. The one she was seeking was standing beside her, and she recognized him after he spoke her name.

After they embraced, Jesus told Mary to go and tell the disciples what she had experienced, which she did. "I have seen the Lord," she said to them as she told them about their conversation.

It is hard to find a more beautiful story in scripture. I love the tender and personal way it has been written and preserved in the fourth gospel.

What message do you think the writer was sending his readers through his account of Jesus' resurrection? Of course, he wanted them to know Jesus' resurrection appearance meant they, too, would live beyond the grave. No tomb can separate us from God and those we love, either.

In addition to this, what lessons did the Evangelist have in mind for his peers and us? I pondered that question last week and want to share some ideas for you to consider.

Just because you don't see a way for things to get better, don't think they can't. Mary didn't go to the tomb that morning to see if Jesus was alive, but to grieve. When Jesus died, so did most of her hopes and dreams for a better life.

She would cherish her time with Jesus and forever appreciate his healing her, but her time with him was over, and all she had left were some fond memories. Her best days were behind her, and to a great degree life was going to return to how it had been before Jesus came her way.

That was before Mary had an encounter with the risen Lord. That experience changed everything.

The future filled with hope and joy she could not see after the crucifixion came clearly into focus after the resurrection. No longer would she look at life merely through human eyes, but also eyes of faith.

If God could raise Jesus from the dead, God could help her with any problem she had. From this point on, what appeared to Mary as a dead end was an opportunity for God to create something new.

In 1995, a rock band by the name of *Semisonic* was formed in Minneapolis. They are best known for their 1998 hit, *Closing Time*, a song about leaving a bar in the wee hours of the morning because it was time to close.

The most memorable line in the song is repeated two or three times. "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." That's the message of Easter, although from an unlikely source.

God is always using endings to create something new. According to Old Testament scholar, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, this is God's most distinguishing characteristic.

"The entire Bible bears witness to this gift of newness from our God and His son, Jesus," Brueggemann declares. "The forming of the worlds, the liberation of Israel, the anointing of David, the deliverance of the exiles, the summons to disciples, the silencing of the storm, the call to Lazarus, all attest to God's ability to give newness to a world filled with endings."

For this reason, in ancient Israel, grief was always linked to hope. Believers never had to settle for things as they were and give in to despair, like those who believed nothing happened apart from them, and no one was at work but them. As people of faith, they never came to the end of the road. Always and at all times, there was more, even when it seemed improbable or impossible.

I believe this is the message of Easter, too, and I cannot think of one we need more. Easter is about starting over when you thought all hope was gone. For Christians, grief is linked to hope just as it was for our ancient ancestors. We, too, believe in a God who makes all things new.

Perhaps you feel like you have reached a dead-end this morning. You are getting a divorce, or your beloved mate of many years died. You have lost your job and don't know which way to turn. You are facing severe limitations because of health issues. Your best friend moved away or has betrayed you. Your children are no longer at home and have left you with the empty nest.

What do you do? Talk to God about it. Lay your life and need before Him. Ask Him to help you create something new in your life, even as you share your fears, anxiety, doubts and confusion. Let Him know you trust Him, but you will need a lot of help to remain confident and faithful to see new possibilities and travel down unfamiliar roads. I am certain our Lord will help you, for as Gail O'Day reminds us, "the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with God the Father now marks the believing community's relationship with God."

Just because you don't see a way for things to get better, don't think they can't. With God's help, all things are possible.

Just because you don't see God working, don't think He isn't. God is always working on our behalf, whether we notice it or not.

When did the resurrection of Jesus occur? It was during the night. Who saw the stone rolled away, and Jesus walk out of that tomb? No one did. When everyone was asleep, God performed his greatest miracle. When no one was watching, God quietly went about His work.

We don't have to see God at work to know He is. What we must do, however, is trust Him like a child does a loving parent and live in anticipation.

Do you have this child-like faith? Would you like to have it? Let that empty tomb remind you the same God who worked on Jesus' behalf after he was buried is working on your behalf now.

Just because you are only one voice, don't think you can't change the world around you. Mary did. After her encounter with Jesus, Mary was told to go tell her story to the disciples. Her testimony would lift their spirits and fill their hearts with hope and joy.

Do you realize Mary Magdalene became the first evangelist? This strategic responsibility was not given to one of the original disciples called along the Galilean seashore who traveled with Jesus throughout his ministry. This obscure woman whom Jesus met along the way was chosen to begin this journey toward hope and healing for all people. Her compassion, courage, commitment and zeal made it possible for her voice to be heard and lives to be changed.

Your voice needs to be heard, too. Your story can lift spirits and change lives. You may only be one person, but you may be the only person some people need to hear to turn their lives around.

For you see, salvation doesn't lie in programs, formulas or resources, as Samuel Wells has written in a recent *Christian Century* article, but friends. Be that kind of friend.

Who needs you to be this kind of friend this week? Whose life could you impact by telling your story? Will you let God use your testimony to touch the lives of those around you to give them faith and hope? I pray you will and know God will help you.