

The Resiliency Of Hope

John 20:1-18

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I always wonder what the hours after Jesus's death were like for the disciples. It is hard for us to imagine. After all, the events we remember this Holy Weekend took place more than 2000 years ago at a time in which people lived very differently than we do now, in a city many of us have never seen, speaking a language we don't understand, celebrating holidays from which we will always be one step removed, and under the power and intimidation of an Empire we have only read about.

Unfortunately, Scripture does not help us much in understanding what happened between Jesus's crucifixion and the miracle of Easter morning. We know that most of the disciples fled and scattered before Jesus ever took his last breath, terrified that if they were caught, they, too, would soon hang on a cross. Both Matthew and John tell us that a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, asked permission from Pilate to take Jesus's body off the cross, wrap it in clean linens, and bury it in a tomb he had recently hewn for himself. And we learn from John that eventually, the disciples found each other and gathered in a single room with the door locked lest the Jewish leaders find them.

The rest of what they did, how they felt, what words were said, we do not know, and, as we said, it is hard to imagine. Or is it? We may not know the details of what the disciples experienced, but we do know what it is to sit in the dark, in the waiting, in the fear. We know what it is to assume the worst, to question what is true, to get mired in doubts and suspicions as we sit with uncertainty. We have lived our own versions of Holy Saturday. Many of us are there now - in that gray and empty in-between space, the space after the heartbreak and before the first hints of a new beginning.

For example, someone you love - or you yourself - is living with a potentially life-ending diagnosis. Treatment has started, but there is no way to know how effective it will be, whether this is a road that will lead to a longer life or to its end.

Or you, like the disciples, are living in the fog and heaviness of grief after the death of a loved one or a recent divorce. People may tell you that it will get better. You know it *must* because no one could live with this constant, crippling, gut-wrenching ache for long. Yet, simply getting through the day is hard enough. How can you ever return to living a life that seems normal?

For some of us, the darkness came in the long months of pandemic isolation and has never really lifted since. We suffer from depression and anxiety - not wanting to leave the house but wondering if we should. Others may struggle with addiction to drugs, alcohol, or sex.

And still others among us are deeply troubled by the troubles of the world. "Why are you weeping?" the angel asked. Presbyterian pastor Mary Jane Cornell suggests in response, Mary might well have asked the angel, "Why not? If you're not weeping, you haven't been paying attention. Don't you read the papers, watch the evening news? Haven't you noticed? The

principalities and powers of evil are running rampant in the world.” We get overwhelmed by the school shootings, the aftermath of tornadoes, the expelling of two young black lawmakers from the Tennessee legislature, the politics of hate and fear and power.

There are so many different ways we live out the brokenness of Holy Saturday. I don’t know what personal darkness enfolds you this day or, as Henri Nouwen has said, what stones keep you buried in the grave. Yet, I suspect each of us at some time has stood, like Mary outside the tomb, weeping in the dark. To imagine the disciples in the days after Jesus died, we do not need to know the size of the room where they were, the words they said, the food they ate. We need only to remember the pain, the fear, and the fury we have known in the times in-between, in the darkness waiting for dawn.

It is in darkness that we pick up the story of Easter morning. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...” scripture says, “Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.” Here is Mary who, for three years, traveled with Jesus and learned from him. She listened as he taught about kindness and compassion, justice and love. She witnessed and experienced his acceptance of outcasts and his healing of the sick. She was there as the crowds cheered for him on Palm Sunday and as they cried out to crucify him just a few days later. She watched him carry the heavy, wooden cross on his way to Golgotha. And she cried at his crucifixion, heartbroken to see his agony as his life slipped away.

In him, she saw courage and integrity as he faced the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the injustice of his trial, and the cruelty of the cross. And all the hope, all the promise, all of the goodness he embodied hung on the cross with him.

Scripture tells us, while it was still dark, Mary made her way to his burial site. While it was still dark, she held her hand to her chest trying to release the ache that grief creates. And while it was still dark, she found the stone rolled away and an empty tomb.

Easter starts in the dark because while it was still dark, God was creating a miracle - a messy, beautiful, joyous, astounding miracle. And, of course, that is the Easter message for our lives and for our world, as well. We may see only darkness, but while it is still dark, God is already at work. While it is still dark, God is healing our broken hearts. While it is still dark, God is planting seeds of hope. While it is still dark, God is resurrecting and recreating, nourishing and nurturing, so something new can be born. In our hearts, in our lives, in our church.

“It happens to all of us,” Nadia Bolz-Weber tells us. “God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”

When we lose someone we love, when our health fails, when our relationship with a family member or friend gets broken, when the church disappoints or disturbs us, God loves us back to life. God is in the promise that death, illness, brokenness, injustice is not the end of the story. God is eternally in the movement of good, in the arc of justice, in the light that overcomes darkness, in the strength and power of love to heal and resurrect us.

That is what Easter is all about. We are Easter people because we know God is not finished yet - God will continue to create new life, new hope, new beginnings, new light in the darkness. And we are called to co-create all of this with God.

Still, even after she sees the empty tomb, it takes a while before Mary realizes what is happening and recognizes Jesus standing with her. Once she finally does, she must want with all her heart to hold onto him, to keep him there with her, to take him to the other disciples, to simply be with him. Yet, he says, “No. Do not hold onto me”. Scholar Gregory Robbins explains this saying, “Her story and his, his experience and hers, cannot be anchored in the past. Nor is it theirs alone. Instead, he calls her by name to announce to the disciples - and, by extension to all who would believe - a new creation, an unimaginable future.”

Sometimes, we look for healing and hope by holding onto the past or trying to recreate what once was. We sit day after day by the grave of our loved one or find ourselves trolling our ex on Facebook. We revert to being kids again when we are with our parents or struggle as parents to let our children grow up. We try to recreate the glory days when every sanctuary was packed, and every Christian went to church.

Yet, what Jesus tells Mary is she cannot hold onto him. Rather, he calls on her to move forward, to share the story, the joy, the hope, the promise that is resurrection. She will be the witness to what God is doing. She and the other disciples will carry the promise of new creation out into the broken world.

And, of course, he calls on us to do the same. We cannot hold onto the past. We cannot bring back what is gone. Rather, as faithful followers of Christ, our call is to carry the light that is God out into the darkness. We each have a vital role to play in being agents of God’s love, voices for justice, purveyors of peace, people who live our daily lives according to what Jesus taught. Love one another as I love you. That is our work to do. That is our calling as Easter people in the face of our fears.

And that is what we celebrate on Easter morning. The God of love loves us into new life - over and over again. And nothing, and I mean nothing, not death nor Covid-19 nor loss nor grief nor change, nothing will stop God’s resurrection work in the world. Jesus Christ is risen, and we, who rise out of the ashes of our losses and defeats, are made new by the God of goodness and love so we can bear that love to the world. While it was still dark, God created a miracle.

Thanks be to God!