



“The Unfinished Symphony”

John 20:1-18

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

It did not take them long, did it? Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Sunday and by Friday they had him nailed to a cross. In five days that raced by in a blur, Jesus went from leader of a love and justice movement to fallen martyr.

Can you imagine the crash in emotions his followers felt? They entered Jerusalem as a triumphant band of disciples confident their leader was a prophet sent by God - if not the very Messiah himself. They were honored to be close to this healer of broken bodies and broken relationships. They were awed by his wisdom about the perils of greed. They were grateful for his unconditional love and generous support. They were astonished by his courage to stand up to the leaders who were in collusion with the Romans in supporting a system that kept most people in poverty. They were emboldened by his announcement that God’s divine realm was breaking into the world; and change was coming!

But a handful of days following their magnificent march into the Holy City, their confidence was crushed. After Jesus shared an intimate dinner with his inner circle, the earth began to shake and the bottom dropped out and the forces of evil won the day.

The gospel writers tell us of the painful final hours of his life. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane that night to pray. While he was praying, Judas appeared with an armed mob. Judas embraced Jesus and used the kiss of friendship to condemn his Teacher. It was his predetermined signal to the sword and club wielding crowd. They pounced on Jesus and marched him up the hill to the high priest where the elders and scribes had assembled. They found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and then puffed up their egos by spitting on him and beating him.

At daybreak on Friday, they rushed him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, who sentenced Jesus to death. After the Roman soldiers taunted and tortured him, they nailed him to a cross, and hoisted him up outside the city wall for everyone to see. It was a grisly sight and a most gruesome way to die.

We know that Friday all too well, don’t we? That dark day epitomizes sin and evil, and all that is wrong in our world. Like an endless loop on our computer, sometimes it seems that our world is stuck on that dark Friday. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and several other countries plague our planet. Religious extremists in every major religion distort their faith to justify violence in the name of God. There is killing in our communities as gangs battle over turf. Greed wrecks the economy and leaves people homeless. Addictions destroy individual’s lives and they drag their family down with them. Oil spills pollute our oceans and garbage out of Hollywood pollutes our minds. Illnesses rob individuals of the best years of their lives. Yes, we know that dark Friday all too well.

When Jesus was crucified, the shock of that Friday turned to despair on Saturday. For the followers of Jesus, what happened on Friday was unbelievable. On Saturday, reality overwhelmed them. Their charismatic leader was really dead. That meant their mission in life was dead. Their hope for the future was dead.

Today's text from the Gospel of John informs us that very early on Sunday, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. If you have lost a loved one, you may have had the experience of waking up well before sunrise and not being able to get back to sleep. You lie there in bed and replay the painful event over and over in your mind until you finally stumble out of bed.

After replaying the nightmare a hundred times, Mary decided to walk to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed on Friday. Was she going there because she still could not believe it was true? Was it her way of showing respect and saying a final goodbye?

Have you ever visited the spot in the cemetery or memorial garden where your loved one was put to rest just to talk to him/her? To say, "I love you. I treasure the life we shared. Thank you for picking me up when I fell, for teaching me how to treat people, for forgiving me when I hurt you, for showing me what is important in life."

Maybe that's why Mary went to the tomb – to talk to Jesus. And because her wound was still so blistering raw, perhaps she went there because she was angry with him. Perhaps she wanted to say, "Why did you have to push so hard? Why couldn't you have toned down your message or gone a little slower or made some compromises? Why did you have to go and get yourself killed?"

Whatever her motivation for going to the tomb early that morning, nothing was as she had anticipated. She had seen the men seal the tomb, but now that stone was rolled away. She ran as fast as her exhausted legs could take her. She ran to Peter and the disciple Jesus loved and blurted out her interpretation of what she had seen. Mary said, "They have taken our Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Mary's assumption is that the authorities have come up with yet another way to insult their fallen leader. They cannot let him remain in peace, they've snatched his body.

Peter and the other disciple react by speeding to the tomb. When they arrive, they peer inside and all they can see are the linen wrappings. They are stunned and not quite sure what to make of it. Our passage says only, "The disciples returned to their homes."

In the meantime, Mary has followed them back to the tomb. Tears rush down her face as she stares into the open cavern. She is startled to see two messengers of God sitting where the body of Jesus had been. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. She repeats her assessment: "Because someone has taken his body."

She turns around, and through the early morning haze, sees a figure standing a few feet away. Imaging him to be the gardener, she asks if he has taken the body. He responds by saying her name: "Mary." She can't believe it; it is Jesus. And the earth shook again

Mary runs to the disciples and makes the announcement that changes history: "I have seen the Lord." That evening Jesus appeared to other disciples and nothing has ever been the same.

However you understand the details of the resurrection, something powerful happened that transformed timid disciples into courageous witnesses. Men who were quick to run and hide when Jesus was arrested, even denying that they knew him, became bold in declaring that Christ had risen, many of them being put to death for their proclamation.

In her book, *Intensive Care*, Mary Lou Wiseman writes about the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from muscular dystrophy. Something remarkable happened moments before he died. Young Peter's body was paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and as death was approaching, he was

moaning random and disconnected thoughts. His mother wrote that his “voice sounded so far away, so lost.” But, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke to his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, his parents looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

With tears streaming from his eyes, his father answered matter-of-factly. “Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

There was a silent pause, and then, apparently aware that he was at the edge of death, Peter said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And moments before their son died, his parents positioned his arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death.¹

Scholar Tom Long, points out that Christian hope is not sweet and mild. It is more like an “impudent position” against the powers of death. It is the defiant belief that the powers of that dark Friday and the depression of that dismal Saturday that continue to wreak havoc in our world today are not the final word. It is the belief that love is mightier than hate and that beyond death, there is new life.

A bright, athletic young woman named Faith Dremmer was a senior at a Chicago high school. Last year for spring break, she and two of her friends decided to take a 500-mile bike ride from Missouri to Indiana. But one afternoon as they were peddling down the highway, an 86 year-old man veered across the road and collided with them, killing Faith.

At her memorial service, her rabbi told those gathered at Temple Shalom the teenager’s story of being a Chinese orphan, of being adopted when she was two and growing up in Chicago. He spoke of her loving ways and her kindness to others. Her life, he said, was an “unfinished symphony...Yet one that consisted of beautiful (music).”²

Each of us knows wonderful people whose lives have ended far too soon. It seems apparent that God intended a full, four movement symphony, but their lives ended before it was complete. An illness, an accident, a war, a natural disaster took them from us despite the fact that they still had so much goodness to give to the world.

Jesus’ life was an unfinished symphony. He still had so much music within him with which to heal the world. He still had many broken bodies and broken hearts to mend. There were still many blind who needed him to open their eyes. There were still many hungry he needed to feed. There were still many sleep walkers he needed to awaken. Jesus had so much more music to write and to play when the cold hard nails of reality put an end to his life.

The resurrection defiantly declares that death is not the end of what is right and beautiful. It is not the end of what is true and loving. The resurrection boldly asserts that life’s great Composer, the Spirit of energy that creates, the Spirit of love that nourishes, the Spirit of wisdom that guides, the Spirit of joy that inspires never tires in transforming what was into what will be.

That is what Mary discovered on that first Easter morning. First Mary, then the disciples, then countless others discovered that the music had not stopped. Enchanting harmonies and marvelous melodies are yet to come. Jesus Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen!

NOTES:

1. Thomas Long, "A Living Hope," on *30 Good Minutes*, February 1, 2009.
2. Kristen Mack, "Teen cyclist remembered as talented, outgoing daughter," in *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 2010