Mary Magdalene heads to the tomb before sunrise. Her Master has suffered a brutal and humiliating death at the hands of the state and she is dragging herself through the valley of the shadow of death. Why has she gone to his tomb? To anoint his corpse with oil. To touch him one last time. Why not go to the tomb? She has been awake for hours and feels compelled to say good-bye one last time.

But when she arrives, the stone is not covering the entrance and a chill knifes through her body.

Bewildered by what she discovers, she quickly takes off running. She finds Simon Peter and the other disciple and tells them what she has found. They race to the tomb and Mary follows. The two disciples see that the body of Jesus is missing and do not linger. They return to their homes while Mary remains in the garden crying.

Inside the tomb are two angels and they say to Mary, “Why are you weeping?” The gospel writer does not spell out her full response, but if you have lost a loved one, you can fill in some of the thoughts spinning in her head and some of the feelings wrenching apart her soul.

Why am I weeping? Because my heart is aching – the one who always knew the right thing to say to lift my spirits is gone. Why am I weeping? Because I’m confused and disoriented – the one who helped me make sense of things is no more. Why am I weeping? Because I’m furious! Injustice and cruelty win again and I am sick of it! Why am I weeping? Because I feel so lonely – the one who made me laugh and think, the one who supported me and gave me confidence, the one who made me want to do the right thing has departed. Why am I weeping? Because the one who gave me hope that what is ahead will be better than what is, has been snatched away and I doubt that I can go on without him.

It is unclear why the angels asked Mary why she was crying. Perhaps Mary looked as if she were about to explode from all the grief raging inside and the angels’ question was an opportunity for Mary to unload her jumble of thoughts and feelings and tears. Thanks be to God the angels did not respond to Mary with pious platitudes.

Perhaps you have known someone uncomfortable with death who responded to your grief with words that were not only unhelpful, but contradicted every fiber in your body. You are suffering from a loss that strikes to your core, and a friend says, “It must be God’s will.” Inside you scream out, “No! I do not believe God willed a young mother to die of cancer.”
Or the friend says, “I know exactly how you feel.” And you want to lash back, “No, you do not know exactly how I feel. You may know how it feels to lose your spouse, but not mine. You do not have the same passionate memories or the same unfinished business. You do not know how I feel.”

Thankfully, the angels who spoke to Mary did not try to slip away from her grief by saying something trite. They did not pat her on the shoulder and say in a voice brimming with condescension, “There, darling; everything will be just fine.”

When Mary trudged her way to the tomb before dawn, she assumed she would find the corpse of Jesus wrapped up tightly in burial linens, but his body was missing. After Mary alerted Peter and the other disciple they raced to the tomb to make sense of what Mary had told them. Of course, being men, they probably figured she had made a mistake. Maybe in the dark, she had looked in the wrong spot. Maybe she could not bear the hard truth. Can’t you just hear Peter saying, “Well, we men will go check it out and explain everything.” But, when the two disciples reached the tomb, it was empty and that buttoned their lips as never before!

The resurrection of Jesus is the unexpected jolt that contradicts all expectations. We think we have it all figured out. We know the way things work. Nothing lasts forever. Everything perishes. When you’re dead, you’re dead. End of story. But, the resurrection of Jesus is a divine act of defiance to the power of death.


When Jesus was put to death, it appeared that the Jesus movement had been stopped cold. Not interrupted, not detoured onto another path, but terminated along with its leader. And not only did the Romans and Temple authorities believe that silencing Jesus would silence his followers, but his followers believed it, too. On Friday afternoon when Jesus was killed, his disciples fled and went into hiding afraid that the authorities would come after them next.

Yet within a short time of abandoning Jesus – and in Peter’s case, even denying that he knew Jesus – something life-altering transformed them. Something filled them with such courage that nothing could deter them from proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Most of the original 12 would eventually be persecuted and killed for their stubborn faith in the resurrection. What could have so radically transformed them, if not appearances of Jesus after he died?

The Apostle Paul never saw Jesus when he was alive, but Paul also experienced the risen Christ. Initially, he was a devout Pharisee dedicated to persecuting those who dared to claim that Jesus was the Messiah. But after experiencing a vision of Jesus, Paul turned 180º and became the greatest evangelist in the history of the church. On five occasions he was whipped with 39 lashes, three times he was beaten with rods, several times he was imprisoned and yet Paul refused to change his testimony that Christ had risen. In fact, the resurrection was so pivotal for Paul that he wrote to the church in Corinth, “For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.” (1 Corinthians 15:16-17).

It is hard for me to believe that without experiencing the risen Jesus, the fearful disciples could be transformed into fearless messengers who profoundly altered the history of the world.

To those locked in a room that will not allow in anything they cannot understand, will not concede anything they have not seen, will not acknowledge anything that might fall into the category of mystery; to those who have locked themselves inside such a room, the resurrection seems little more than a mythical tale.
However, for those who do not immediately dismiss the fact that thousands of people have been visited by dead loved ones; for those who do not automatically label as “delusional” every person who has died and been resuscitated and told similar stories of existing peacefully in another dimension; for those who realize that the universe is much more enchanting than our logic sometimes admits, then life beyond death is not only a very real possibility, but it is a complete game-changer. If God is a God of resurrection, then new life is always possible; and no loss – not even death – can ultimately destroy hope.

On that first Easter, as Mary stood outside the tomb, her eyes blurred with tears, a voice from behind pierced her sobbing. He said, “Whom are you looking for?” Assuming it must be the gardener, Mary said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him.” Then, Jesus said, “Mary!” She spun around and said, “Teacher!” And seeing his presence, Mary was filled with hope and joy. The risen Lord would appear to the disciples and many other followers assuring them that the Creator of heaven and earth is a God of resurrection who loves us not only in this life, but also in a continued existence beyond death.

Shortly before Christmas, Leigh Knauert’s fourteen year old son committed suicide. His death followed only a brief time after her husband’s death, the teenager’s father. Reeling in pain at such a dark hour, the family gathered for a memorial service. The minister began his remarks saying, “There are no words to match Peter’s death. The depth of loss, sadness, and anger is beyond all of our words. But my assignment is to find words for the loss, sadness and anger…and maybe I have found some adequate words for this moment…. maybe not, in the Book of Lamentations. This book from the Hebrew Scriptures is a long poem of grief” following a devastating loss. “But then there is a pause in the poem. It is like the pause after the Good Friday death of Jesus, before the in-breaking of Easter. The poet says ‘But.’ But in spite of the excruciating loss ‘I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.’

Incredibly, the mother who was suffering this double loss, now alone to care for her other three children, also pulled herself out of the pew to speak. She said, “Even in the unspeakable awfulness of what has happened to Peter, death will not have the final word, not in my house and not in my family. Horrific images and haunting questions of why will not be my focus, even if they manage to creep in sometimes. Darkness and evil and horror and sadness and guilt and pain will not be the last thing left at the end of the day. I will continue to tell them that they have no place in a family that has been won over by Jesus’ message of triumphant love. That love will triumph over everything, even this.”

Then, she quoted from 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul speaks of God transforming our physical bodies to imperishable spiritual bodies so that we can live forever in God’s kingdom. She quoted Paul: “Where, O Death, is your sting?” And she said, “That I can answer. The sting of death has been and will continue to be a big part of my life experience. However, I can also answer the next question (in this passage), ‘Where, O Death, is your victory?’ And my answer is, ‘Not here’…We will keep choosing life, and we will move ahead in our faith in the One that will, one day, banish all death forever, the day when we meet Peter again face to face and see that beaming smile and know that all of this is behind us, and love has won once and for all.”

This is why we gather in worship at Easter, to rejoice that the One who bolsters us and holds us together in our times of pain, our times of trial and our times of grief, will resurrect us to new life in God’s eternal realm.

NOTES

Prayers of the People – Randall T. Clayton

Almighty God, your glory and power are great and your love is beyond the ability of words to describe. On this day when joyful music fills the air, the sight of lilies greets our eyes, and the proclamation of the Gospel is heard so powerfully, we gather with joyful and grateful hearts. We praise you for your love, for the hope we have in you, for the good news that death has been swallowed up in victory.

As we celebrate the resurrection today, we remember people who do not know joy this day…we pray for those who are experiencing physical or emotional anguish today, for those for whom death has intruded upon their lives, for those who are in hospitals and nursing homes, for those in economic distress, for those near and far who live in fear, for those who are lonely.

Although we sing and pray and speak today with joyful certainty, we know that many have questions. The alleluias we say sounds empty to them, the halleluiahs we sing has a hollow sound for some. O God, where people are having trouble finding faith, where they feel lost, speak your message of peace and hope.

A real humanitarian crisis in Syria calls us to respond. Unrest in the Middle East, the situation in the Ukraine, too calls us to prayer and to action. Bring peace to this warring world, O God, be with your people who live as refugees and with your people who are unable to flee and to those who have chosen to remain in difficult and tragic and dangerous situations. Let your church, O God, be a lifeline for peoples around the globe who live in desperate poverty, who reside in war torn lands, who know the pain and fear and atrocities of war or terrorism.

On this day of new life, let your church offer new life to the world. Empower your church to proclaim our faith. With joyful hearts we ask that we might find ways to join Mary singing, “We have seen the Lord.” Help us to join Mary’s song by our voices and also through the giving of our gifts, the work of our hands, the prayers we raise, and the love we share.

We ask this prayer in the name of the Risen One, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.