

Easter in the Upper Room

By: Meagan McLaughlin

April 12, 2020. It's been challenging thinking about how to mark Easter this year, when in the season of COVID-19 we can't be together physically. In our isolation, we feel a little closer to the disciples in theirs, waiting for a bit of good news. Pastor Meagan's sermon this morning is on the promise of the resurrection, on the light and life and healing and hope on the other side.

Reading: [John 20:1-18](#)

*** Transcript ***

This Easter feels really weird, doesn't it? It's been challenging thinking about how to mark Easter this year, when in the season of COVID-19 we can't be together physically. We aren't gathered in our sanctuary with the altar full of gorgeous color, and the choir resounding, and the smell of lilies flooding the space. We won't be feasting on a brunch, at a table surrounded by loved ones, traveling from distant places to celebrate. In comparison with "normal" years, in some ways it hardly feels like Easter.

And yet here we are. We have shared the Last Supper in our Upper Rooms. We've been at the cross with Jesus, remembered how he died, acknowledged the ways in which we contribute to the brokenness that still oppresses and wounds so many today. And now we are huddled again in our Upper Rooms — just as the disciples were that early first Easter morning — waiting for a bit of good news, something to let us know that resurrection is coming, something to prove that Jesus has in fact risen from the dead.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens declares, "Marley was dead to begin with. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story that I'm going to relate." And I say to you this morning, Jesus was dead to begin with. And this must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I'm going to relate. Because although Jesus' death is not the end of the story, if we don't know the sacredness and intimacy of Maundy Thursday, the horror of Good Friday, and the silent despair of Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday comes like too much chocolate and jelly beans on an empty stomach: it tastes really good but it won't get us very far. And so, my family of faith, this year may in fact be more like that first Easter than our typical Easter celebration, because we in our Upper Rooms are a little closer to the disciples in theirs.

The women — Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and John — who went to the tomb that morning bearing spices, were there when Jesus died. They knew he was gone, and they didn't have the slightest expectation that he had survived all that had happened. They were drawn to the tomb that morning not by the thought that Jesus might be alive, but by the call of their faith to honor one they had loved and followed by anointing the body that was left. They were there because they were not afraid to face the darkness of the tomb. They faced the darkness, walked into the tomb, and saw evidence of the miracle: the stone rolled away, an empty tomb, a pile of linen left lying on the floor. What would you have thought had you been there? How would you have told the story to the others, waiting back in the Upper Room to hear about their visit to the tomb? What would you have thought if you were one of Jesus' other followers hearing this story?

The women themselves didn't believe it at first. Mary was sure that someone was playing a cruel trick, that Jesus' body had been stolen and hidden. As Mary begs to know where Jesus is, she hears the voice — that voice, the one she knew so well — saying her name. And she believed, or began to believe. And knowing how crazy it might sound, she runs to tell the others.

Resurrection, this coming of life out of certain and undeniable death, is impossible to explain or prove. And yet for those who have experienced it, it changes everything. The women who went to the tomb and the other disciples who followed them, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, once they had witnessed the resurrection, they were never the same. They faced the darkness of the tomb. They knew the despair. And they were transformed when they discovered that death is not the final word.

And resurrection isn't just a one-time event. It is a promise from God in Jesus that when we enter that tomb, God will be there. Those who have been to the tomb know this. People who have lived with the devastation of addiction and found recovery. People who have experienced profound grief, and found to their surprise that one day, if only for a moment, they could feel joy again. People who have found reconciliation after years of estrangement. Or healing and empowerment after living with abuse.

Resurrection, beloveds, is not so much a one-time event as it is a process of coming out of death, over and over and over. Just as the disciples did not instantly understand and believe and experience the freedom of Jesus rising from the dead, the resurrection in our lives comes slowly. In times of darkness and destruction, we need to hear this promise — as we follow the news of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we stick close to our phones and computers and tablets to stay in contact with loved ones we can't be with right now, as we struggle to navigate all new routines and all new ways of sharing space, as we live with the loneliness of not being able to be with our close communities, as we pray for the health of those who are called to risk their well-being and lives to serve others, as we hold our breaths hoping for good news about those who are ill, and as we grieve from a distance those whose funerals are deferred to an uncertain future. We need to know that even in the face of illness, oppression, loneliness, and grief, death will never be the final word.

Resurrection is not a magic eraser that takes away the pain and the despair. Jesus was dead to begin with, and nothing can ever change the horror of that. The women in the tomb knew that. The good news came to them when they were fully expecting to anoint a body. The disciples in the Upper Room knew that. It took many days and many encounters with the risen Jesus to ease their fear and fulfill their freedom. Resurrection does not erase death, but it does reveal the loving, redemptive presence of God in the midst of it. And that changes everything.

The promise of the resurrection, brought first by Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and John, is that no matter how dark the tomb is, God is with us in the tomb, and there is light and life and healing and hope on the other side. When we know that, we can face the tomb, even if we are afraid. Resurrection is hard to explain and impossible to prove, but when we see it we have to tell the story. Today, just as Jesus said Mary's name, the Risen One is whispering our names, and calling us to be witnesses to the resurrection. Today we celebrate this promise in our Upper Rooms, trusting that new life is here and it is coming to us in its fullness. We celebrate today in our Upper Rooms, claiming the hope of a celebratory feast, with flowers and food and physical community, when the doors can be safely opened. Come with me and tell anyone who will listen: alleluia, Christ is risen!

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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