

Rev. Lisa Schrott
April 9, 2023 Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18
Seeking and Seeing

Hallelujah! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead...it has been a long, hard week for Jesus and the disciples. We heard the haunting story on Good Friday. The story of betrayal, abandonment, suffering and death. The darkest day, the veil in the temple torn in two. Good Friday ends with Jesus' burial: They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."¹ But the story is not over. Hear now the promise of the empty tomb from the Gospel of John. ...

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary

¹ John 19:40-42

Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

“I have seen the Lord”, Mary announces to the disciples. In the days before Insta worthy selfies or TikTok videos, Mary’s declaration of the good news – that Jesus’ death was not the last word – seems a bit understated. It is an intimate declaration to a few people she knows well... more likely whispered words as the night transitions to morning than the heralds of angels and shepherds that greeted Jesus’ birth. Mary Magdalene brings good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. And yet, in the simplicity of her words, “I have seen the Lord” we know all we need to know. The tomb is empty and Jesus lives. The triumphal message of the good news of Christmas has been fulfilled by the startling good news of Easter morning.

The late writer and Presbyterian pastor, Henry Buechner contrasts the bookends of Jesus’ life this way, “Christmas has a large and colorful cast of characters including not only the three principals themselves, but the Angel Gabriel, the Innkeeper, the Shepherds, the Heavenly Host, the Three Wise Men, Herod, the Star of Bethlehem, and even the animals kneeling in the straw. In one form or another we have seen them represented so often that we would recognize them anywhere. We know about the birth in all its detail as well as we know about the births of ourselves or our children, maybe more so. The manger is as familiar as home. We have made a major production of it, and as minor attractions we have added the carols, the tree, the presents, the cards, Santa Claus, Ebenezer Scrooge, and so on. With Easter it is entirely different.

The symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. You can't depict or domesticate emptiness. You can't make it into pageants and string it with lights. It doesn't move people to give presents to each other or sing old songs. It ebbs and flows all around us, the Eastertide...

He rose. A few saw him briefly and talked to him. If it is true, there is nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say. For believers and unbelievers both, life has never been the same again. For some, neither has death. What is left now is the emptiness. There are those who, like Magdalen, will never stop searching it till they find his face.”²

“What is left now is the emptiness.” There was no heavenly host singing joyfully in the clouds, just two angels sitting quietly in the tomb. There were no kings paying homage, just two barefoot disciples who had recently abandoned Jesus. That is why we celebrate with brass and bells and choirs of alleluias; that is why our empty chancel is full of the flowery promise of new life. We, like Mary Magdalene, come searching and seeking, until we find the face of Jesus.

² Frederick Buechner. *Easter. From Whistling in the Dark*. An ABC Theologized. Harper & Row Publishers, 1988, p40-42. Available online at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/3/25/easter?rq=easter>

“...As you leave this place, may God bless you with seeking. Seek out the hungry. Seek the weary. Seek the good in every person you pass. Seek out the hopeful. Seek the faithful. Seek God in each of us. As you seek and as you wonder, may you find what you are looking for.”³ These words may sound familiar to you, for these are the words of the benediction we have been using during the season of Lent – a call to being seekers.

Our Easter Sunday scripture this morning opens with Mary Magdalene as a seeker. She is seeking closure on the events of the past few days. She had heard her teacher – her friend - Jesus utter the words “It is finished,” bow his head and give up his spirit. Jesus’ friends Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths and laid him in a new tomb, sealing the tomb with a rock. Mary of course knew of all of this, yet here we find her early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, coming to the tomb. Maybe she is seeking closure – the tomb a reminder that this chapter of her life is over; maybe she is seeking solace and comfort – wanting to be close to her friend as she grieves the hole in her life his death has left; maybe she is seeking answers to all of the “why” questions that persistently gnaw at her, keeping her from sleeping at night; maybe she is seeking all of this and more.

Mary Magdalene is drawn to the tomb and in her seeking, she finds something so unexpected her brain cannot process it completely and fills in the blanks. And like so many times when we are tired or anxious or afraid in the absence of all of the information, we get it wrong – or at least not quite right. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Now I have heard and read and studied this scripture many times and this week was the first time I realized that Mary doesn’t look into the tomb and see the tomb empty. No, she sees that the stone had been removed from the tomb and so she ran to Peter telling him, not what she saw, but rather what she had concluded, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

How many times have I done that? Concluded something from a few pieces of information without actually checking the details. Concluded I knew a person’s story from the way they dressed or talked or presented themselves. Concluded that a situation is hopeless – no way for a resolution – only from hearing one side of the story. Concluded the sky is falling so my best bet is to follow the advice from the recent movie about MSU astronomers who detect an asteroid headed to earth – just don’t look up.

Mary is seeking – but is she able to see the answers she is seeking? Are the disciples able to see? We hear that Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb after hearing Mary’s

³ From the Lenten liturgy *Seeking*, the work of the Rev. Sarah A. Speed, *A Sanctified Art LLC*. sanctifiedart.org.

conclusion. They see the linen wrappings lying there and the tomb empty. Scripture says that the one disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, saw and believed, but did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.

That is the challenge with the empty tomb. There is nothing to see. How do we make sense of the absence of the body of Jesus? As Frederick Buechner says, "It's not really even much of a story when you come right down to it, and that is of course the power of it. It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They seem to be telling it simply the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt."

That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt. " Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," after her encounter with the one she mistook for the gardener. Her seeking has become seeing and that makes all the difference in the world.

Mary sees that her yearning for a deep and enduring connection with the divine are made real in the Christ who transcends death. She sees a Christ who embodies every human hope of wholeness, belonging and acceptance.⁴ Mary Magdalene is exhibiting what psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl called "tragic optimism." This is not putting a happy face on tragedy or refusing to look at life's darkness and avoiding uncomfortable experiences – what we might call "toxic positivity," which is ultimately a denial of reality.⁵ In her Good Friday message, Pastor Rebekah shared the importance of standing in the depth of pain – being uncomfortable at times. This is what Mary Magdalene is doing when she comes to the tomb that morning. She is seeking meaning amid the tragedy of the crucifixion of her teacher and friend.

In her seeking, Mary saw Jesus. What do we see in the empty tomb? I see the hope that when we despair that our guilt is too great for God to forgive, our fears are defeated because Easter means God has cleared all accounts, liberating humanity from shame, reconciling us to God and each other as God's children.⁶ We are made a new creation in Christ. I see the hope that the death of healthy ecosystems on our planet will be defeated by

⁴ This language is adapted from Ed Rosado, *An Easter Reflection on AI and Technology*, Science for the Church found online at <https://scienceforthechurch.org/2023/04/04/an-easter-reflection-on-ai-and-technology/>

⁵ Scott Barry Kaufman. The Opposite of Toxic Positivity. The Atlantic. August 18, 2021. Available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/08/tragic-optimism-opposite-toxic-positivity/619786/>. Based on Viktor E. Frankl. *The Case for a Tragic Optimism*. Simon & Schuster, 1984.

⁶ Adapted from SALT Lectionary Commentary for Easter Sunday. Found online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/6/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

our willingness to address climate change as individuals and as a church. In that empty tomb I see hope that inward deaths from loneliness and desolation will be defeated by communities of love and grace that we create. I see hope that the death that stains the ground we walk on will be defeated – it will be defeated by our prayers and our actions to end the scourge of gun violence. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb seeking so much and she left the tomb receiving more than she could imagined. She saw see Jesus.

As you leave this place, may God bless you with seeing. See the hungry. See the weary. See the good in every person you pass. See the hopeful. See the faithful. See God in each of us. As you see and as you wonder, may you find what you are looking for. Amen.