

April 20, 2025

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Isaiah 65:17-25 & Luke 24:1-12

*The Wilderness Does Not Have the Last Word*

Our Good Friday scriptures ended with the burial of Jesus, wrapped in a linen cloth, and in a rock-hewn tomb. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph of Arimathea who was carrying the body of Jesus. They saw the tomb and how Jesus' body was laid. Then the women returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath the women rested according to the commandment. Hear now the next chapter of this story from Luke 24:1-12.

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they, that is Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again."

Then the women remembered Jesus' words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. **This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

Like a cat who  
caught her claws  
on the yarn  
of a sweater  
in the making.

So the world  
unravels when  
we aren't looking

or doing  
anything  
to stop it.

Can we pick up  
the stitches,  
or must we  
start again?

These words are from the poem *Like a Cat* by our very own PCO Poet Laureate Eunice Cresswell. She wrote that poem a few weeks ago and gave me permission to share it publicly. As a pet parent to a very rambunctious three-year old cat – yes Sebastian turned three on Maundy Thursday – I appreciate the chaos, most often unintended, that a cat can litter our world with. I love the image of a sweater in the making unraveling before the knitter can stop it. “Can we pick up the stitches, or must we start again?”, Eunice asks. As one whose knitting has been limited to very misshapen scarves, I know how I would answer the surface question. And what about the deeper question... when the world unravels, can we pick up the stitches, or must we start again?

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women were likely asking that question – or something similar – on that morning so many years ago. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, a long journey, listening ardently to Jesus’ teachings. They had experienced Jesus’ commitment to meeting people where they were in their life, really seeing them and hearing them, even those others might not have addressed at all, or if they did would do so dismissively, like the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well in the noonday sun. They had celebrated the healings of those who had diseases or limitations, those who were lonely or not welcomed, healings that restored people back into community. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had heard Jesus speak about the need to repent, to turn one’s life around, asking for forgiveness for your sins and seeking a new path. They had shared meals with Jesus and had come to appreciate the way Jesus made sure all were included at the table. They were there when Lazarus, Jesus’ beloved friend, was unbound and rose from the dead. On that day in Bethany, it seemed like the depths of wilderness despair could not get any worse. And yet here they were, bringing spices to anoint their friend and teacher after he been betrayed by one of his own, arrested, and tried before the Roman governor Pontious Pilate. There was a brief flicker of hope that Jesus might just be flogged and released by Pilate, but the crowds shouted that he should be crucified. The wilderness of darkness and despair was so deep for these faithful women. Do they pick up the stitches, or must they start again?

They picked up the stitches and went to the tomb. They needed to know that the body of their teacher and friend had been cared for in death. After they had seen the tomb where Jesus was laid, they went and prepared spices to anoint his body. After a day of rest on the Sabbath, they returned to the tomb, taking with them the spices. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women came as a group, supporting each other in their grief, preparing themselves for the tender task of anointing their beloved friend. For these women, the wilderness of their pain would not have the last word. The wilderness of fear – fear of what the Roman officials or religious leaders might do if they wanted to make an example out of the followers of Jesus – no the wilderness of fear would not have the last word either. They loved their friend too much.

The women found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went into the tomb they did not find the body of Jesus. Instead there were two men in dazzling clothes. Hello wilderness of confusion and terror. And then the men asked the question that would change everything. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.”

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The women remembered Jesus’ words. The wilderness of death **did not** have the last word. The women went and found the disciples and spread the news. Now that the male disciples saw this testimony from the women as an idle tale is a sermon for another day. Today we celebrate the women’s courage in the face of an overwhelming chaotic, unraveling, and cruel world. A wilderness so vast and dark; a wilderness of powers and principalities that hit them fast and furious with everything it could muster. A wilderness of hopelessness and dread for what would come next. That wilderness, that wilderness, did not have the last word. The tomb was empty and Jesus had risen from the dead. It was time to pick up the stitches **and** it was time to start again.

I wonder if the words from the prophet Isaiah that we heard Nadine read went through their minds?

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating,  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.

A new heavens and a new earth. This was the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, Jesus spoke so much about. As witnesses to the empty tomb they were now going to experience – or moreover – were going to be tasked with - helping to create that new heavens and the new earth. A world where, as Isaiah says, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox .... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

I wonder if they were as overwhelmed by the enormity of it as all, as I am on most days. I wonder if they had hoped for clear cut instructions on what was next – a manual of some sort that laid out the steps in an orderly fashion. Instead they opened the box from Ikea and there were a lot of pieces and some pictures with parts that didn’t at all resemble what lay before them. The Rev. Cameron Trimble asked the question this way in an essay I read this week: “*Are we hoping for a resurrection that makes sense? We want it to be clean, don’t we? Orderly. Redeeming in some measurable way. But the first Easter didn’t make sense. ... The story didn’t resolve. It unfolded in confusion, in awe, in the wide space between “what*

just happened” and “what happens now.” Maybe that’s the space we’re in too.”<sup>1</sup> Trimble reminds us that this a space that Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to as the “prophetic imagination” and our task is to hold out for an alternative world, to refuse to accept the world that powers like the Pharaoh and the Roman emperors and authoritarian dictators throughout history have insisted are real.

Because friends, we know better. The wilderness of oppression and resentment, the wilderness of hatred and cruelty, the wilderness of defining your neighbor as one who looks like you and speaks like you, as one who has the same type of job and family structure and the same belief system – that wilderness does not have the last word.

That wilderness has been defeated by the one who breathes love into every pore of our being. That wilderness has been defeated by the one who challenged the authorities of his day. By the one who gives us courage, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who went to the tomb that morning, to believe that we as individuals can become a new creation and we as a community create a new heaven here on earth. To believe that the empty tomb is more than a metaphor. It is a call to become Christ’s body and fulfill Christ’s charge to love God and love neighbor. To believe that we arise and awaken with the new dawn to wrestle with the reality in which we live. To use our prophetic imagination to pick up the stitches and continue to, or for some of us to start, knitting together a world where justice and mercy, grace and love are the rule of the day. I know it is hard to imagine that world right now, when we are surrounded by chaos in just about every sphere of our country. But friends the tomb is empty and Jesus has risen. The wilderness does not have the last word. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron Trimble. What Kind of Resurrection Do We Want? Piloting Faith Blog. April 18, 2025. Online at <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/what-kind-of-resurrection-do-we-want>; and We See the Face of Lawless Power. April 15, 2025. Online at <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/we-see-the-face-of-lawless-power>