

“Both Sides of the Tomb”

John 20:1-28

Rev. Liz Miller

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Because we know how the Easter story ends, it's easy for us to skip over what actually happens and go straight to the punchline: Christ is Risen! Alleluia! It's true, Christ is risen. But when Mary arrived at the tomb three days after Jesus's death, she didn't know what lie on the other side of the stone. And when the disciples came running after her, they too didn't know what to expect. If we skip past their confusion and their fear to go straight to the “Alleluia!” We miss one of the most powerful parts of Easter morning. That is, Christ's resurrection is not just for those of us who have it all figured out or know how the story ends. Christ's resurrection is also for the rest of us: the ones who struggle, the ones who doubt, and the ones who sing Alleluia but don't fully know what that means for us.

The three who find the empty tomb remind us that no matter who we are or what we are going through, Christ has been resurrected and we are invited to be a part of it. On Easter Sunday, we are not asked to transform and become something we aren't. On Easter Sunday, we are allowed to bring our past and our feelings and our whole messy selves with us to the tomb because it is Christ who has been transformed. It is Christ who comes to us, exactly the way we are, exactly the way God made us.

I know this to be true because on the first Easter morning, Mary is so wrapped up in her grief that she just stands there weeping. Her grief is so raw and consuming that even when Jesus appears before her, she is blinded by her tears and does not recognize

him. It is only when Jesus calls her by name that she realizes who he is. I can only imagine the confusion that she must feel when she recognizes Jesus. To be so fully engulfed with your grief, only to encounter the one you are grieving, alive before your eyes. That is no easy transformation! That is no easy moment to understand and process! For Mary, the Alleluia's were yet to form on her lips, but Jesus still comes to her. He is there with her in her grief and he waits as she dries her eyes. He presents himself as proof that God's love will conquer death, grief, and loneliness and will fill the world with life, love, and hope.

On Easter morning, we see this in the next person to arrive at the tomb, the disciple known as the one whom Jesus loved. We don't know a lot about him, not even his name. We know that he was at the Last Supper sitting beside Jesus. We know that as Jesus was dying, he asked this beloved disciple to take in his mother and care for her as he would his own mother. This beloved disciple is the first one to race to the tomb after Mary sends for them, but he hesitates when he arrives, allowing Peter to go in first, perhaps not wanting to see, perhaps afraid of what he will find. Before the disciple whom Jesus loves, sees inside the empty tomb and believes, on that first Easter morning, he hesitates. He is beloved and trusted by Jesus, but he still hesitates, full of more questions than answers, unsure if he wants the answers he suspects he will find. We know that even though this disciple hesitates, that Christ's resurrection is still for him. You don't have to arrive at the tomb confidently. There is room for pausing, room for uncertainty. In that uncertainty, Christ will still be with you, waiting for you to see and believe.

The third person we meet on that first Easter morning is Peter. The last time we saw Peter, he denied knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. He denied his friend and his Lord, and he watched him die only hours later. Mixed in with Peter's grief must have been his guilt at his own actions, his shame that when it counted he could not stand up for what he believed in. Guilt and shame that the last moments of Jesus' life were further marred by his denial. Despite his denial, despite his guilt, Peter is still invited to tomb. Christ still appears before him. Peter is chosen, not despite his imperfections, but because of them. Peter's story tells us that truly the resurrection is for all who have ever felt the heavy weight of guilt. Peter reminds us that Christ's resurrection is for everyone who has ever had the opportunity to speak justice, and remained silent instead. The resurrection leaves no one out, not even the ones who feel like they will never be worthy to be a part of this awesome story.

Three different people, three different experiences: each with their own struggle and their own inability to understand the power of the empty tomb or to understand that Christ was in their midst. This is what Easter resurrection means: when the very worst thing that can happen happens, God's love will still prevail. When the Son of God dies for another's sins, God's love will overcome that death and make his Son live again. The Easter resurrection means that where we expect death, there will be life eternal. When we expect to be abandoned, Christ will be beside us. When we expect to be inconsolable, Christ will comfort us. When we hesitate, Christ will wait, patiently, until we finally walk into the empty tomb.

For the last 40 days, we have been on a journey through Lent. During Lent we are asked to grapple with our faith. We are asked to put God in the center of our lives, and

then pay attention to the things that make that difficult. For the last 7 days of Lent we walk together through Holy Week, evoking the emotions and the drama of Jesus' last moments. During Holy Week, we are the crowd waving the palms as Jesus enters Jerusalem. We gather around the table of the Last Supper to eat the bread and drink from the cup. We drive the nails into the cross, and at the same time, we weep for Jesus' suffering and death. We are not removed from the experiences of the disciples. We are the disciples. We follow Jesus until the end, and it is us who arrive on Easter morning to find an empty tomb.

Like the disciples, we come with our own struggles. We come with thoughts and feelings that preoccupy us. Some of us grieve: the experience of death and loss too fresh for us. Some of us wrestle our inner demons. We have feelings of guilt for all the things we should have done or all the things we don't feel we do well enough. We have moments of uncertainty about what we are doing in our life or what we are even doing here this morning.

The beauty of this Easter morning is that no matter what you are experiencing or what you bring with you, the resurrection is for you. Christ has risen and it is for all of us to experience. It's not that we set down those difficulties we came into church with this morning, but now that we are here we are offered a fullness of life like none we have ever known. We leave with the hope and promise of a love that can surpass anything we are faced with, a love that is revealed in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This resurrection is for the part inside all of us that feels a little bit broken, so that even in our brokenness we can understand that not all is broken.

Alleluia! How amazing! Think about it for a minute. How amazing is it that the offer of Easter morning is not to come with all the answers, with everything figured out, and peachy keen, but the offer is to be with God, to be with Jesus so that when we leave this place we can do so with an extra spring in our step that wasn't there before. We can leave, feeling healed and mended, even just a little bit, with a smile for our neighbors because Jesus lives and Jesus lives in us! And where Jesus is, we know that there is life eternal and love everlasting. How awesome is that?

The promise of the resurrection is fulfilled within each one of us. So look around at your family, at your neighbors, at the person sitting next to you in the pew. Christ has risen, and Christ has risen for each of us. Each of you are full of God's love and full of life. The stone has been removed from the tomb and the disciples have arrived. No matter who they came as or in what shape they came in, Christ is with them. We are the disciples. Christ is with us.

We celebrate Easter every year because there is a good chance that many days will feel hard. We need Easter. Easter is the wholeness in the midst of brokenness. Easter is our reset button for finding the life that is available to us through Christ's love. Easter is the crocuses and the daffodils that appear as if from nowhere when we didn't even realize how much we missed them during the long, cold winter, and then we see them peeking out of the newly thawed ground and our hope for life is renewed. We come to Easter morning broken, hoping to experience Christ's wholeness. It is here and it is offered through the resurrection. Christ is risen.

This resurrection is for you, for me, for each one of us, so let's proclaim together:

**CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUIA!**