

"Embracing Faith"

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

John 20:1-18

### **John 20:1-18**

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. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to 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.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

On September 11, 2001, I was walking to an 8 am business class when I happened upon a tv left on all night. Normally I would have strolled on by, but this day, this time, was different. Tragedy struck. What happened in the ensuing hours and days and weeks, turned out to be catastrophic: to the victims, to the families, to the businesses, to the residents of NYC, to Americans, to the world. If you were born when it happened, you probably remember where you were and what you were doing on that day. The result of the towers crashing down left

nothing but a pile of rubble, heartache, pain, and doubt. How could this happen? Why did these people have to suffer? Where was God?

On January 12, 2010, I was working with a group of students at Elon University. That night, as we gathered for our weekly bible study, one student came with something she wanted to share that was heavy on her mind. She and her mother had been working with her home church to support the St. Joseph's Boys Home (a home of hope for boys with disabilities and others living in slavery on the streets) in Haiti. That day, she shared with us, that the home where the boys lived came crashing down during the 7.0 earthquake that struck Haiti earlier that afternoon. They had received word from one of the sponsors that the director was also severely injured as he fell nearly 7 stories. Her question that night was honest. Why? They were doing good and trying to help people, I just don't get it? Where was God?

And just this past Monday, April 15, 2019, I was at the lake celebrating our daughter's birthday and enjoying a little calm before the storm this week, when news channels filled with the devastation of the fire engulfing the roof of the famous Notre Dame Cathedral, said to be the most visited sight in Paris, France. A Holy of Holies was going up in smoke. All the history. All the treasure. All the majesty. Nothing but questions filled my mind and I could sense from the reporters, theirs too. What caused it? How could this happen? This was God's house; Where was God?

In each of these occasions, I can remember vividly the place and time and details of the rubble left in ruin; the piles of rock and wood; the sights and sounds of emergency responder vehicles and people longing for answers; the wake of funerals and every attempt to honor those who had fallen.

But there is something else that I can remember vividly with each of these circumstances.

In the search through all the rubble of the twin trade towers, there was a steel beam standing tall and firm in the form of a cross. The base was mounted but each of the other 3 limbs had been severed, leaving the shadow of a cross looming over that rubble.

In the weeks and months following the earthquake in Haiti, with the help of friends from many different churches, boys from the St. Joseph's Boys Home launched a dance tour across the U.S. titled "Resurrection from the Rubble." The star of their performance was none other than the director who had fully recovered from his 7-story fall. The tour rewarded them with an opportunity to share a very powerful message and also rebuild their home bigger and stronger.

And just hours after the fire was put out and responders had a chance to assess the damage inside the Notre Dame Cathedral, one of their first discoveries was that the cross above the altar, the altar itself, and many of the holy artifacts, remained in place.

Where was God? I don't believe it was God that caused those things to happen, but I do believe, without doubt, God was there in each of these occasions. But we might ask, if God was there, why didn't God prevent them or stop them? I don't know. But maybe, just maybe, it is for the same reason God didn't prevent Jesus from going to the cross?

The night before Jesus was betrayed, he knew his fate and what was to come of him, and he asked God to spare him the agony and pain. Jesus too wanted reprieve. But the help God gave him wasn't prevention or escape. The help God gave Jesus was the strength and courage and hope to get through the worst. All throughout Jesus' death, God was there. God sent an angel to be with Jesus. God gave Jesus the right words to speak and God gave Jesus the peace he needed to know that everything in the end, no matter what he was going through, will be alright. So, it was in faith, Jesus went on. In faith, Jesus faced the worst. In faith, Jesus endured. In faith, Jesus died. In faith, Jesus was buried. In faith, Jesus was given new life and was raised. In faith, Jesus was victorious.

When we stop and ponder the resurrection of Jesus, who is the son of God, son of Man, Messiah, humanities' Lord and Savior, it really is all about faith. Sure, faith in things we can't necessarily see, but maybe even more so, faith in things we can't fully understand or comprehend. Why? How? Where? We don't know exactly. The resurrection of Jesus challenges us, in this time and place, to embrace our faith in the mystery of it all.

Our text in John this morning reveals two things we must embrace with our faith: we must have faith in an empty tomb and in the appearance of Jesus. Faith in these then inherently calls us to a challenge we are called to embrace. We will get there in a moment.

First, let's look closer at our faith in an empty tomb.

Like Mary Magdalene, aren't we puzzled at least a little by the fact that Jesus' body, which had been laid in the tomb just hours before her return to pay tribute and embalm, no longer remained. The tomb was closed and sealed after Jesus was buried and a guard was placed near the tomb to keep watch. Our reason and logic want to ask how and what happened? There must be an explanation. Is this story real? And mostly, where was God?

Trying to affirm the validity of the empty tomb, one scholar writes "How did the preaching that Jesus was victorious over death ever gain credence if his corpse or skeleton lay in a tomb known to all? His enemies would certainly have brought this forward as an objection; yet in all the anti-resurrection argumentation reflected indirectly in the Gospels or in any of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Christian writers we never find an affirmation that the body was in the tomb. There are Christian arguments to show that the body was not stolen or confused in a common burial, but the opponents seem to

accept the basic fact that the body can no longer be found. Even in the Jewish legend that a gardener named Judas took the body only to bring it back, there is a recognition that the tomb was empty.”

When Mary, the other women, the disciples, the angels, and the guards, looked in the tomb, there was no body. The only thing that remained was a garment reserved for High Priests laid neatly as though it had never been put on or taken off. In faith, we have come to know that the grave was not the end for Jesus. In faith, we affirm that the resurrection of Jesus teaches us that what God creates is not destroyed but is re-created and transformed. Faith that the tomb is empty, whether we know how it came to be doesn't matter, gives us assurance that death doesn't have the final word and the empty tomb serves as a symbol of victory and triumph.

Next, let's look closer at our faith in the appearance of Jesus.

Jesus was standing there talking to Mary. She didn't quite get it at first and it took her turning toward him and hearing his voice, but she got there. He was not the gardener or a ghost or figment of her imagination. She didn't know how, but her master and teacher and friend and Lord was right there. Christ has been raised! Jesus was alive! The question asked all along, “Where was God?”, was now answered. In faith and assurance, Mary could say to others “I have seen the Lord.”

Now, let's ask ourselves: If we had just witnessed him die and watched him laid in a tomb, what would we think if he then suddenly appeared to us? Would we know it was him or would we think it was someone playing a trick? What is our response to his appearance? Do we say to others, or even run and tell others, “come and see”? Do we shout “woohoo!” and feel a loving embrace and extra comfort? Or do we cringe and say, “Oh crap” out of fear of what that might mean for us? What if Jesus walked through those doors right now? What if Jesus appeared as a guest at your lunch or dinner table this afternoon? Guess what? In faith, we don't have to ask what if, because, in faith we know he has, and he will! How do we know? Because we have encountered him. We have seen his work. We have been the beneficiaries of his light and love. That is precisely what we are to experience in the community of faith, in the breaking of the bread, the pouring of the cup, and in the living waters that splash over us in our baptism.

Now, because we have encountered Jesus and been the beneficiaries of his light and love, we are called to embrace our faith as an inherent call to witness.

It was Mary's initial witness and testimony of our risen Lord that sparked the proclamation of his resurrection to be spread like wild fire. And even today, all these

years later, we are the beneficiaries of the good news she shared. Therefore, the final act in embracing faith in the resurrection of Jesus is to “Go!” and tell others about it.

Jesus death and resurrection does far more than tell us of Jesus’ victory over death, it empowers us with an immediate charge and commission to preach, to baptize, and to forgive. The resurrection of Christ commissions us to carry to those we come in contact with in the world, the good news of Jesus and the salvation made possible through him as the way, the truth, and the life. John’s gospel and Jesus’ life call us to witness and testify. This is ultimately what Christianity is all about. A Christian is someone who can say “I have seen the Lord.” A Christian is someone who can embrace the mystery of an empty tomb and the appearance of a man known at one time to be dead. It means knowing Jesus and having faith that Jesus is alive.

Jesus is alive! This is what we need to hear this morning. Better yet, this is what we need to experience in our worship together and throughout our lives- today and always... Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive in this place. Jesus is alive in you. Jesus is alive in me. Do we see it? Do we feel it? Yes! I know I do. Then we must “Go” in faith, and share this good news that God is with us even when, especially when, rubble piles up.

On this Easter Sunday, "In the hope of the resurrection of the Lord, I challenge us all to not be content. Though we cannot, like the disciples, see him visibly, I urge us to see Christ Jesus by the eye of faith; and though, like Mary Magdalene, we may not “touch” him, I urge us to converse with him, and to know that he is risen, we ourselves being risen in him to newness of life. To know a crucified Savior as having crucified all our sins, is a high degree of knowledge; but to know a risen Savior as having justified us, and to realize that he has bestowed upon us new life, having given us to be new creatures through his own newness of life, this is a noble style of experience: short of it, none ought to rest satisfied. In faith on this Easter Sunday, and everyday hereafter, may we both “know him, and the power of his resurrection.” (Jason Allen)

Let all God’s people say... Amen.