

## **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. 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' 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 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.'" 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.

## **Hope Rising** - April 12, 2020

*John 20:1-18*

As we look around the world this day, April 12, 2020, it is a bleak picture. Around the world, over 1 and a half million people are infected with the Covid-19 virus. Nearly 100,000 have died. Our nation, sadly has three times as many cases as the next highest country, Spain.

We may find ourselves, or friends, or family, out of work or on reduced hours. We ourselves may be or certainly know people who are experiencing shortages of food and other supplies. They are worried about making payments. We all hate being trapped in our houses, cut off from the people we love.

Needless to say, none of us have ever faced a situation quite like this before. We are at the mercy of a virus and often have no idea who has it or where it is lurking in the air or even on doorknobs. Waiting, waiting, waiting is all we can do. And perhaps it will be finished — or perhaps not. And perhaps we will have vaccines and other ways to treat it — or perhaps not. We just don't know when this thing will be over, if it's ever over completely.

Consider the situation faced by the friends and disciples of Jesus following the Good Friday disaster. Suddenly, their friend, their mentor, the one they had staked their futures on was gone. And not just gone, gone in a way that put them in personal danger. Jesus had been killed on the orders of the Roman government, the Jewish government, and the Chief Priests of the Temple. As Peter found out as he waited outside the courtroom where Jesus was being tried, following Jesus could get you killed very quickly. Peter denied knowing Jesus in order to save his life. Can we doubt that if any of the other disciples had been accused of being a follower of Jesus, they too would have encountered the same situation? How about me? How about you?

In the course of a week, the status of being a follower of Jesus went from being respected and admired by the people to being the enemy of the people. What could Jesus' disciples do but hide and wait for it all to go away — and then, and then, and then go back to their lives before Jesus appeared and turned everything upside down?

Consider further, the lives that Jesus' followers would be going back to. No one could claim that for the average person, life in Palestine was anything like good. The Roman government wanted more and more in taxes. The Jewish government went along with what Rome wanted and would grab men at random to work on endless construction projects. The religious leaders stood for following the same empty rules and rituals, worshipping a God who seemed very remote from the regular person.

For a brief three years or so, the disciples and followers of Jesus had been exposed to something else. In Jesus, they saw for themselves how God intended the world to be. They saw a world of people healed from their diseases. They saw a world where God's presence was experienced by

everyone, not just Jews, but also by the people Jews were supposed to hate. Romans, Phoenicians, Greeks, and even the hated Samaritans. They saw a world where God treated powerful soldiers the same way God treated widows, orphans, and slaves.

They heard about their God in a new way. They heard that God loved them deeply, even more than a mother loves her child. And they saw God's love operating in new, exciting ways. They learned that God's love was not dependent on following a set of rules or praying a certain way. Instead, they saw God's love at work, sharing food with those who had none, welcoming all to the table of fellowship, turning assumptions about who God favored upside down when Jesus said it was harder for a rich person to enter heaven than it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

All this, and so much more, did Jesus offer, teach, and do throughout the three short years that he spent in his ministry on earth.

Then suddenly it was all gone. A Last Supper together, an arrest, a sham trial, then death in the very worst way possible: crucifixion. Jesus presented an alternative view of what it meant to be human, what it meant to be in fellowship with God. Jesus asked his followers to think, live, and dream in new ways because with God all things are possible.

Can you imagine for a moment being Peter, or John, or Mary or any of the others who thought for an all too brief moment that Jesus' coming meant for their personal lives, for the life of the world? Such wonderful dreams! Such wonderful visions! Such wonderful hopes for the future!

Hope. One dictionary defines hope as, "the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best." As we face the future in a world dominated by this Covid-19 virus, as the disciples faced the future without Jesus, it is very easy to feel hopeless.

Yes, we say to ourselves, this pandemic will eventually go away, like all pandemics do. We're not sure exactly when, but things will get back to normal. Or will they? One thing is certain. Life will not be the same once we are let out of our homes and can resume life and living. Life will be quite different from what it was before we had ever heard of this disease. Perhaps better in some ways, definitely worse in other ways. Certainly different. If our hope is that we can just turn back the clock to, say, January 1 — that's not going to happen. No hope there.

The disciples without Jesus had no hope of returning to a world of being with, listening to, and helping their friend with his ministry. Jesus was dead and what future could they look forward to? A future very different from what they had experienced from their three years on the road with Jesus. Moreover, while they might return to their old jobs (like Peter did as a fisherman), how could they work as they did and not be touched and transformed by all they had experienced?

How do we hold onto hope when our worlds are in chaos? How can we hope when we hardly know what tomorrow will bring, let alone next week or next month? Hope is about the belief that what we

want will actually come to pass. Aside from wanting Jesus back, which wasn't going to happen as before, did the disciples know what they wanted? Aside from our wanting to forget about this Covid-19 virus, which we cannot do, do we know what we want to happen once the all clear is given? In short, how can we even imagine what hope looks like when we aren't sure what to hope for in the first place?

This, friends, this is the glory of resurrection. This is why Easter is far, far more about one man returning to life. This is why today of all days is the reason that people all over the world can have reason to hope even when it seems all hope is gone.

Now we know that in the gospels Jesus told his disciples on a number of occasions that he would be arrested, tried, and killed. But in all the accounts the gospels gave us, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was talking about. Peter swore that he would die along with Jesus and never deny him. This is the same Peter who, when Jesus told him he was going to be arrested and killed, said, "that can never happen!" And Jesus responded, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Hope is meaningful when we know what we are hoping for. But aside for a general feeling of wanting things to get better and this horrible virus to go away, what do we want? What did the disciples hope for after Jesus died? They knew he wasn't coming back. Probably their first hope was they wouldn't be caught, tried, and killed like Jesus was. But beyond that, what did they want?

That is why resurrection is so powerful. Consider what happened all those years ago. Jesus returned to life. God raised Jesus from the dead. How exactly it happened, no one knows. But that it happened, there can be no doubt. Why? Because if Jesus had not been resurrected and witnessed by his followers, then everything that happened after the resurrection would be total foolishness. And, as Paul writes, we are to be pitied most of all for believing this nonsense.

But if resurrection didn't take place and people instead spent their lives believing in and promoting a lie, could this Jesus movement, the church, have survived for 2000 years? Clearly, the disciples of Jesus, armed with the knowledge of having seen the resurrected Christ for themselves, were convinced of the reality of that truth. They were so convinced that they were able to go out into the world and speak to total strangers in all parts of the world about what they had seen. But the real miracle is not what those first witnesses did, it was those who came after did. Considered that in a mere 40 or 50 years after Easter, none of the original disciples of Jesus remained. There were no eyewitnesses — just some written accounts that eventually became the New Testament and the work and faith of the men and women who heard about Jesus second hand or third hand.

Remember, we here are hearing about Jesus not second hand, not third hand, but one hundredth hand or more! All we have is a book and the example and faith of those who have gone before us. If what they experienced wasn't true, how could this idea of resurrection have remained in force for so

long? Why would people still believe it? Why would millions and millions all over the world shape their lives around the fact that Jesus who died was raised by the dead by God, vindicating his sinless life and proving that everything he taught and everything he said was not just true, but Truth.

Resurrection is not just about one man coming to life. It is about a whole new way of looking at and living life. All the things that Jesus talked about, all the healings and miracles he performed, all of these point to a new, better, and totally different way of life and living. We certainly aren't there yet, but we know what the standard is and we know that we are part of making Jesus' vision a reality.

That friends, is why hope, real hope, is rising, rising despite Covid-19, rising despite global warming, rising despite incredible inequality and injustice, rising despite the wealth gap between rich and poor getting wider and wider and wider.

Resurrection means that everything that we thought about the world and the way it supposedly works is wrong. Resurrection means that the vision for life and living that Jesus put forward is right. Resurrection means that there is a future, a wonderful future coming. I can't tell you what that future is going to be like, but I can tell you it will be something none of us can imagine right now.

Spring is coming, despite the virus, despite unemployment, despite all the terrible things that are happening right now. Spring. Where impossibly tiny things called seeds are transformed beyond all recognition into flowers and trees and vegetables. There is no way you can look at a seed you've never seen before and predict what it's going to turn into.

That is the way it is with resurrection. Jesus returned to life and by so doing, he became the cornerstone on which all that is good in human society is founded on. Everything we strive for: justice, equality, health for all, education for all, a planet fit to live on and so much more, traces its roots to this day.

On this day, of all days, God said, YES to everything that Jesus stood for and the progress that we have made in this world, as imperfect and incomplete as it is, is living proof that Jesus, the living one, was raised from the dead.

Hope is rising, my friends. Hope is rising. It is rising in the middle of this horrible pandemic. It is rising in the impoverished homes in our nation and every nation. It is rising in the schools. It is rising in laboratories. It is rising on polluted beaches and in smog-filled skies.

We aren't there yet. We won't get there in our lifetimes. But get there we will because this day, this Easter Day, means that hope does rise. It rose back then. It rises today. It will rise tomorrow.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.