

April 21 – Easter –

The Worst Thing is Never the Last Thing

Luke 24:1-12

The deep darkness of the night was just beginning to give way to the dawn when they set out on their errand, these faithful women. Luke shares how they had come from Galilee with Jesus. They were the ones at the cross when all the disciples had fled. They were there when the men took Jesus' lifeless body from the cross and they saw Joseph of Arimathea wrap it in a cloth, perhaps they even helped with this. Then they had seen them place Jesus' body in the tomb and heard the grating sound as the heavy stone door of the tomb was rolled into place. An audible symbol of all that had ended in their lives, the connection with Jesus, his ministry, his love, his laughter and more. All gone, sealed behind a stone. These women had spent the Sabbath in grief. Since it was against the law to work on the Sabbath they had probably sat together, consoling each other as they made plans. As soon as the sun went down on the Sabbath, I see them getting to work. Lighting their flickering oil lamps, they spent the night preparing the spices, getting the oils so they would be ready at first light to set out for the tomb. If there had not been time to acquire what was needed on Friday they would have gone out and pounded on shopkeepers doors seeking the embalming spices and oils. They wouldn't wait until morning. For them it was important to prepare Jesus' body for burial as soon as they could. It was the last bit of kindness they could give to this man they loved so much. There had been no time Friday, but today they would complete this act with love. So, with heavy hearts they set out for the tomb, carrying their spices, anointing oils and linen wrappings, sad and weighed down by grief. Can you sense their profound experience of loss as they trudged to the tomb? All of us have experienced such moments, when life has done its worst and we are left trying to pick up the pieces one sad step at a time. We will get back to the women in a moment.

For Christians, our defining story is that the God who created all things, ultimate nature is love. God came to us in Jesus Christ to show us the way, the truth and the life. He called us to love our neighbor and our enemies. He called us to forgive. He commanded us to show compassion, and to help the weak, the vulnerable, the hungry

and thirsty. He was crucified and from the cross Jesus cried out to God, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" We are gathered here today because we proclaim that on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, demonstrating God's power over evil, sin and death. This story shapes our lives, our understanding of the world and our place in it, and is meant to lead us to love, compassion and hope.

Let's get back to the women, and especially Mary Magdalene, as they went to Jesus' tomb. She was a very important disciple. She exemplifies, in Luke's gospel, a nobody who became a somebody. Mary was from the town of Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She was, as far as we can tell from the Gospels, single, with no children. Luke tells us that Jesus cast seven demons out of her. In the first century demons were considered the cause of any unexplained medical condition or mental illness. Whatever her demons, Jesus set her free and she had begun to follow Jesus and the disciples, hanging on every word Jesus said.

In the first century women, while valued and loved, were also viewed as less than men. A line from a common prayer dating around that century used by Jewish men said, "God I thank you that I am not a woman." Men could divorce their wives for no reason. They were often left poor if their husbands divorced them or if their husbands died, the property being passed on to the male heirs. And, it would be nearly impossible to imagine a prominent rabbi counting women among his disciples. But Jesus did. Luke, in particular, tells us Jesus regularly stopped what he was doing to minister to women who were sick or in need. Luke tells us that at least six women travelled with the disciples, maybe more, and only Luke tells us they provided much of the funds for the work of Jesus and the disciples. And Mary Magdalene, likely rejected and discarded by her own people, became chief among these female disciples. She loved Jesus and demonstrated remarkable courage in standing at the cross as the male disciples hid. And on Easter morning as they were still in hiding, she went to the tomb, finding the stone rolled away.

Luke records no dramatic meeting between Jesus and Mary at the tomb. In fact, in Luke, the first recorded appearance of the risen Christ was later that day when he

encountered two of his disciples as they walked to the town of Emmaus and was finally known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In the Gospel of John, we have the story of the encounter in the garden. As Mary wept after finding the tomb empty and Jesus' body gone, the risen Christ spoke to her. In hearing her name, she knew Jesus was alive. In Luke, the women encounter two men who proclaim that Jesus is risen. We are not told they are angels but their dazzling clothes gives us a clue as to their true nature. The women then go to share the good news. The disciples consider it nonsense. Peter runs to the tomb and finds out that what the woman had reported is true, but he returns home wondering what had happened.

It seems, for Luke, it is important for us to come to terms with the resurrection without visible symbols. We need to believe it, accept it, and let it transform our lives. We are not given images of the resurrected Christ. Instead we are prompted to remember Jesus' words, his teaching and more importantly his love and power. We are to understand that through Jesus we live with hope.

In Romans 12 the Apostle Paul writes: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This is precisely what we are called to do as Easter people. We serve a crucified and resurrected Messiah. As Easter people we are Christ's agents and instruments to bring good from evil, to bring love where there is hate, and to bring hope where there is despair.

Frederick Buechner's famous words, "Easter means the worst thing is never the last thing" are words for us today. It means that this life is not the end, only the beginning of our life eternal. We can live with hope even when suffering and living through the tragedies that happen in life. When faced with death we can celebrate life. As people whose defining story is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we are called to live our faith in such a way that others find the hope and assurance they need when they are going through what they feel is the worst thing to ever happen to them. They are to see, through us, it is not the last word God will write about this moment in our lives.

9:00 service

I think of the young man whose wife died of an undiagnosed blood clot from a fall. Both were in their 20's and looking forward to life. He was devastated and so filled with grief his parents wondered if he would go on living. At her service he heard anew the words of resurrection and eternal life. He left the service putting one foot in front of the other just trying to get through each day. For a long time he was like the women going to the tomb on the Easter morning. They were headed, as far as they knew, towards death and final leave taking. They were doing what was required. There was no sense of hope. But as we know, God had a most wonderful surprise for them. This young man in faithfully continuing on, going to church, little by little, saw life begin to come together in new ways. Now many years later, he is married, has a son and life is filled with joy. The worst thing in his life was not the last thing.

11:00 Service

When I think about how God is at work re-writing the endings that come to us in life, I think of a man who buried his wife after a long and protracted illness. At her service he said that there was nothing left for him. He saw his sole purpose as taking care of her. Now that task was over and he saw empty days ahead while he waited for his own death. I said nothing to him but I didn't believe him. That day he felt like the women headed to the tomb. As far as they knew they were dealing with death and a final leave taking. They were doing what was required. There was no sense of hope. But as we know, God had a most wonderful surprise for them. So too this man. Just recently I heard that he was getting married. Something new has happened in his life and he found out that the worst thing is never the last thing

People ask me from time to time, "Do you really believe this story that Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty, that Jesus rose from the dead, that evil and death will not have the final words—that the worst thing is never the last thing?" My response is always the same: "I not only believe it, I'm counting on it." I have bet my eternal life on it. I live each day believing that no matter what today brings something better awaits. Ultimately, I believe with all my being that eternal life with God, in love awaits. So I believe that the worst thing is never the last thing. I hope you do as well.