

Watching the Tombs Open

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Jeremiah 31:1–6, Matthew 28:1–10

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It started with the women going to watch the tomb, to that place of death, where sorrow, guilt, disappointment and emptiness grips our hearts and will not let go, will not let us breathe – unless of course we learn to trust God with our fears. The women had a lot of reason to be sorrowful, to wonder why Jesus' life had to end so brutally on a cross when all he had done was to bring healing to so many people, teaching people about God's abundant life. But the men had so much more to agonize over, for they were Jesus' disciples, taught so much about the unyielding powers of the empire. They were the ones who had promised their faithfulness and love in the hour of Jesus' greatest need but had indeed turned their backs on him. This morning they are in hiding, licking their wounds, and fearful for the future of their movement and for their personal lives.

We may know what that place feels like, especially at the end of a long, hard winter where the lack of Vitamin D has sapped our resilience, at a time where it seems harder to shore up our hope in the face of the ongoing stories of conflict, suffering and death in Afghanistan, in Darfur, the Middle East, global warming, or financial insecurity in our global markets. If that is all God has in store for our world, for our personal lives, to be entombed by our fears and despair, there would be little point in getting up with the dawn every morning, in stretching our muscles to get out there to face a new day.

But something stirred in the souls of Mary Magdalene, the woman who had been healed of seven demons, and the other Mary, at that dawn, that drew them to the tomb of Jesus, their teacher and their friend. What was it that enabled them to get up in the morning? Was it curiosity about what tomorrow would bring? Was it a way to deal with the shock that the death of a loved one brings? Was it love, the desire to be near their beloved? Was it hope that stirred in their souls, that indeed there might be more to this story of God's undying love? It has been said that we should never deprive someone of hope, it might be all they have.

It was hope that the prophet Jeremiah gave to his people as they lived into the consequences of their exile in Babylon, the destruction of their temple in Jerusalem, the loss of their land and livelihood. He gave them hope that one day they would return to Zion, they would worship together again, and that they would grow food on their own soil and enjoy it. This would happen for them again because God had formed a covenant with them and God would not desert them. They might be unfaithful, or turn away from God, but God would never abandon them or be faithless – not when they were exiled, and neither in the face of death itself.

The women search for God, for meaning, for a sense of purpose in the face of death, when grief is too much to bear alone. Jesus, the one who showed them so much love has died. Has God abandoned them? Was Jesus' teaching all for nothing? Was God's covenant over, a sham, a delusion? These are questions that reappear, over and over again, so we should not be afraid of them, even when they appear within our own souls. Atheism is the face of the closed tomb.

Matthew, the gospel writer, wants to get our attention now, for the earth rumbles a reply to our deepest existential fears. The earth truly quakes with anticipation for what can happen to those who are empowered by the living God, for those who search for God midst the tombs of this world.

An angel of the Lord, as startling as a bolt of lightning, rolls away the stone from the tomb and reveals that it is not filled with the stench of death, with signs of decomposing flesh, confirming our deepest fears that this flesh and blood is there is to this fragile life. Instead the women see that the tomb is empty and they hear the words of the angel, the central message of Easter that resounds in the hearts of searching people in every generation – “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples.”

He was raised to life again. Do we have proof? Or will finding blood stained shrouds with the DNA of Jesus give us faith? Or will proving that the bones of Jesus have been discovered in some ossuary in Jerusalem destroy our faith? St Paul himself refers to Jesus' resurrection as the raising of a spiritual body, not as a resuscitation of a dead man as in the story of Lazarus. In the book of Daniel he speaks of the resurrection of the dead in this way: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” Daniel 12:2,3 The ancient world believed in the resurrection in this spiritual way. It is the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment that seems to demand evidence.

What convinces me of the truth of the resurrection is not any creeds, any theological statements that the church devised some hundreds of years after the death of Christ, (although I do respect the task of theologians to engage our minds in the working out of our faith). But what convinces me of the resurrection is the way those early witnesses, the women and men who had followed and learned from Jesus, turned away from the empty tomb, turned away from the powers of death, the formidable powers of the Roman Empire, and how they quickly moved forward into the future with hope and even with joy.

They heard the commission of their risen Lord in the depths of their souls, to carry on with his mission of bringing compassion and restorative love and justice to a misguided world, and they went forward experiencing the Christ with them still. They became they the new embodiment of the living Christ. They would go forward into the future with more than just a tambourine in their hands to make merry, although there is nothing wrong with that, but they would go forward with the risen Jesus, and with the power of the Holy Spirit burning in their hearts, giving them courage to live and with a wonderful story to tell.

So many of you gathered here today have wonderful stories to tell of how God has raised you to new life, sustaining you through hard times, encouraging you to begin again, to believe in yourself, to believe in the power of love and forgiveness. Graham Standish in his book *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* challenges those of us in the mainline churches to renew our spiritual cores, the remember whose people we are, to let the power and grace of the Holy Spirit breathe into our hearts and into our churches again. He names the truth of the weariness that many of us feel as the Christian movement grows older causing us to feel tired. His challenge though comes on the level of faith, addressing our spiritual core. “if we really believe in resurrection and renewal, then new life is possible. All it takes is recapturing the vitality that exists in every lasting church at its birth.”

Today, on this Easter Sunday, the earliest Easter since the 1920's, without the usual evidence of renewal in the form of warm weather, crocuses, daffodils and bird song, we have only the excited and wondrous joy of two women, greeted by the risen Jesus, that God still has a purpose for them and their lives, and that the powers of death and fear will not hold them back.

So claim this joy for your own lives, for the life of our children, for the life of our community, for the life of this church. Stretch your muscles, rise up on your feet, open your hearts to Christ and be prepared to run like the wind as the tombs are opened, for the Spirit of God is alive, calling us to a renewed purpose, to encourage each other with love and with hope. For as this Easter transforms us, and I know it will, we can believe with confidence – Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!