

“The Call to Rise Up”
John 20:1-18
April 16, 2017
Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church

It was like a nightmare. One from which she couldn't wake up. Every time Mary thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. Just days earlier, she had stood in the crowd, unable to believe what she was hearing, as the mob called for the crucifixion of Jesus. And then, just hours later, she and some others – mostly women – had stood in shock and silence watching his life seep away from him as he hung from the cross in pain and agony.

And after his body had been retrieved and prepared for death, after it had been lovingly wrapped in funeral linen, she had watched as it was laid in a tomb, the opening to the tomb sealed by a great stone.

She wouldn't be able to sleep for days on end because of the awful things she had witnessed. She would wake up screaming in the middle of the night, and unable to fall back asleep. And it was on just such a night that she decided to visit the tomb just to be as near him as she could.

And that's when she realized the nightmare wasn't over. Just when you think things can't get any worse, they do. She arrived only to find the stone rolled away, no doubt, by the grave robbers who had stolen the body. It was more than she could handle alone. So she rushed off to the rest of the disciples to give them the horrible news.

But of all the men who had addressed Jesus as Rabbi, there were only two who felt it worth their time to verify Mary's report. Only two men who suspected that what Mary was saying might actually be true. Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have paid any attention to her, since after all, she was only a woman. And as everyone knew, women were nothing more than bearers of idle tales. But remembering how Jesus had shown respect for Mary, these two men decided to rush off as fast as they could to the tomb and see for themselves.

And John's Gospel says both of them entered the tomb, surveyed the surroundings, discovering it empty except for the linen funeral wrappings, and based on their findings, at least one of them believed. But it was a belief that wouldn't have much effect on their lives because they left the tomb and all that it represents to simply return to their homes. In fact, just a few verses later, we read that they were among the other men who had called themselves followers of Jesus, huddled behind locked doors, in fear that they would find themselves soon sharing the same fate as Jesus. No, if Peter and the other disciple believed because of what they had seen inside the tomb, it wasn't the sort of belief that compelled them to do anything other than what they had always done.

There are believers today who are like Peter and the other disciple. They believe, but it's not a belief that changes anything in their lives. They still see life as a dog-eat-dog sort of existence. They still understand some people to have certain privileges that entitle them to extra benefits. They still see the world divided into have's and have-not's. And they still struggle for all they are worth to fit into the class of those who are privileged. And they believe, as long as it doesn't challenge their privilege.

But there is another kind of belief that the Gospel writer reveals in Mary. Mary's belief is the belief of those who exist on the margins, those who are ignored when they tell their story, those whose lives are dismissed as insignificant. Mary's belief is the belief of those who have nothing left to lose. Mary's belief compelled her to remain at the tomb because she had nowhere else to go. And in so doing, she encountered the risen Christ. In fact, she was the first to do so. And in that encounter she was commissioned to share the resurrection news with others. And she did. She left with the assurance that, not only was Jesus not in the tomb, but he was very much alive.

The men who had inspected the tomb could only conclude that, sure enough, Jesus' body wasn't in the tomb. But Mary left with the knowledge that Jesus had overcome the tomb and all that it represents. She left believing that there was something greater than the evil that can lead to death, and

that “something” was found in Jesus the Christ.

The tomb represents different things for different people. For many of you here today, it represents the one out of five women who are raped in America. When you look inside the tomb, what you see is that, although in 1993, the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women provided a framework for action on the pandemic, more than 20 years later, one in three women still experience physical or sexual violence. That’s some of what you see if you are a woman who looks inside the tomb.

If you are Black, you see the names of people etched on its walls: names like Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling. And when you enter the tomb you see African Americans incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites.

Many of us see concentration camps for gays in Chechnya, where the prisoners are being tortured with electric shock and some even beaten to death. We see transgender bodies, mostly transgender women of color, hacked to pieces in fits of rage. We see legalized hate being proposed in one state after another, all under the guise of religious freedom.

Inside the tomb we see melting glaciers, dramatic water shortages, and rising sea levels. We see disruption of habitats that lead to plant and animal extinction. And we see coal-burning power plants which are by far the biggest polluters that contribute to our planet’s destruction.

This is just a taste of what we see if we enter the tomb with Mary. The tomb represents hopelessness, greed, selfishness, and evil. But if we are brave enough to linger, if we are courageous enough to look that evil in the eye, we will experience something more. We will hear the voice of Jesus call our name, just as Mary did. We will hear him calling us from our own tombs into a world desperate to hear a word of hope. We will hear him calling us to rise up from our graves of despair which seem to overwhelm us.

If this resurrection story means anything at all, it means that death doesn’t have the last word. It means that there is hope in Jesus Christ, the one who calls us from despair into a new life.

It’s no accident that the message was given to a woman. It wasn’t by chance that Jesus chose someone who was marginalized and oppressed by her society to share with others a word of hope.

And it’s no accident, either, that you and I have been given the same commission. All of us have experienced brokenness at one point or another in our lives. We all know what it’s like to be crushed down, to feel hopeless, to wake up screaming in the night and afraid to go back to sleep. All of us know what it’s like to be afraid. All of us have our own images of what the inside of the tomb looks like.

But Christ calls us to rise up from our tombs because, you see, Easter wasn’t a one-time event. It’s not the culmination of the story of Christ, but rather, the beginning of our own story. It’s a story of new possibilities. Mary Gordon has written, “For me the meaning of the Resurrection is the possibility of possibility. The great perhaps. Perhaps: the open-endedness that gives the lie to death.” When we proclaim that “Christ is risen, indeed,” we are laying hold to the resurrection power of Jesus to see more possibilities in the people and situations around us than others might see.

It’s a powerful message that has been given to us to share with others. A message that only has meaning if we ourselves believe it. And hopefully, our belief is not like that of Peter’s and the other disciple’s: a belief with little or no transforming power. Hopefully it’s a belief like that of Mary’s: one that compels us to proclaim and live out the ongoing life-changing reality of the resurrection. For it’s through our words and deeds that God is still raising the dead, creating hope amid despair, and sharing words of comfort and invitation that continue to give life.

May we hear our name when it’s called by the One in whom we live and move and have our being. May we hear the invitation to rise up as an Easter people. And may we live out the resurrection’s message of hope in an otherwise seemingly hopeless world. Amen.