

“Easter: When Grief Meets Hope”

John 20:1-18

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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I wonder if Mary went to bed that Saturday night. If she did, I am confident she slept little, if any. It is hard to rest when your heart is broken.

It is obvious she was anxious to return to the tomb where Jesus was buried. She could not even wait until the sun came up, but left her house while it was still dark, which was as much a reflection of her spirit as the time of day.

She had just lived through a week filled with surprises and was probably longing for a time of peace and quiet at the center of her grief. Surely nothing unusual would happen early in the morning that would interfere with this. Little did she know the biggest surprise was yet to come.

She arrived at the tomb only to discover the stone at the entrance had been rolled away. To her dismay, Jesus' body was missing, which broke her heart even more. How could anyone be so insensitive and cruel? Hadn't they done enough to this man whom she loved so dearly? Would this drama never end? No, it would not, and in the end, she would be glad.

She did the only thing she knew to do at that time. She ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple what she had discovered. Immediately, they ran to the tomb to find things as she described. Without any answers they returned home, but Mary lingered at the tomb.

As Mary stood weeping outside the empty tomb, she had an encounter with two angels and then a man whom she thought to be the gardener. Both asked her why she was weeping, and she told them she was disturbed because someone had taken the body of her Lord. She even volunteered to retrieve it if she was told where to go. As it turned out, she did not need to go anywhere. The one she was seeking was standing beside her, and she recognized him after he spoke her name.

After they embraced, Jesus told Mary to go tell the disciples what she had experienced, which she did. “I have seen the Lord,” she said to them as she told them about their conversation.

It is hard to find a more beautiful story in scripture. I love the tender way it has been written and preserved for us.

What part of this story grabs your attention today? As I pondered this question last week, I was drawn to Mary crying outside the empty tomb. This is the only gospel to mention tears at the tomb,

which doesn't surprise me. The close relationships Jesus developed with others were important to the narrator as he described Jesus' nature and character.

Why was Mary crying? The answer is obvious. Just when she thought her heart could not be broken anymore, it was crushed by that empty tomb. It became impossible to hold back the tears.

I appreciate what my friend, Tom Ehrich, wrote last week in his daily article, "On a Journey." "Easter is borne on a river of tears. Easter dawned from the darkness, and found its first witness in a woman weeping."

What has broken your heart lately? Have you lost someone or something dear and precious to you? Have you been to the cemetery of broken dreams recently?

What does the Easter story say to broken hearts? It speaks a powerful message of hope. Shattered dreams will not have the final word in our lives. God will, and that word will be good!

"Easter is about more hope than we can handle," Craig Barnes writes. He's right if he means by this we must have God's help to process this kind of good news.

Easter assures us there is no situation our faith cannot embrace and change for the better if we let it. If God can reach into a sealed and guarded tomb and give life back to his crucified son, then God can help us with any problem we are facing.

For this reason, Easter is about starting over when you thought all hope was gone. This is because grief is always connected to hope for Christians, just as it was for our Jewish ancestors.

We never have to settle for things as they are and give in to despair. Always, and at all times, God is working on our behalf to bring good out of bad and life out of death. As people of faith, we never come to the end of the road because, according to Old Testament scholar, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, the most distinguishing characteristic of God is his ability to make something new.

The key word here is "new." God never promises to restore life as it was, like a misplaced keepsake. What God promises is to lead us down new paths filled with people and opportunities which will make life good again.

Brueggemann refers to this as "the always more of God." We never reach the limit of God's grace or provisions.

"The entire Bible bears witness to this gift of newness from our God and His son, Jesus," Brueggemann declares. "The forming of the worlds, the liberation of Israel, the anointing of David, the deliverance of the exiles, the summons to disciples, the silencing of the storm, the call to Lazarus, all attest to God's ability to give newness to a world filled with endings."

Mary discovered this outside the empty tomb that morning, and came to realize when Jesus uttered on the cross, "It is finished," he did not mean "It is over." There was more to this story, much more, and it would change her life forever.

Is this the message you need to hear today? Your beloved mate of many years died or your marriage dissolved. You have lost your job and don't know which way to turn. You are facing limitations because of health issues and are not sure what the future holds. Your best friend moved away or betrayed you. You have made some bad choices and are reaping the results. Like Mary, you have been crying a lot because your heart is broken.

I know one who is calling your name. He cares about you and wants to help you move forward. Will you embrace him like Mary did Jesus and let him lead you in new directions? Will you let him create something new in your life? Will you let him dry your tears and give you more hope than you can handle alone?

Has he already done this for you? Do you have a story you need to share with someone who can't sleep because their heart is broken? I hope you will do it this week.