

“Immeasurable Grief Turned into Unspeakable Joy”

John 20:1-18

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Easter

Evidently, Mary Magdalene wanted to be at the tomb when the first rays of sunshine broke through the night sky. This is why she left home while it was still dark, which was as much a reflection of her spirit as the time of day.

I have to wonder if she even went to bed that night. If she did, I doubt she slept much. It is hard to sleep when your heart is broken.

Perhaps she thought she would find some comfort just sitting outside the tomb where Jesus was buried on Friday. At the very least, this quiet and peaceful place would give her some time to reflect on how good Jesus had been to her and the difference he made in her life.

Little did Mary know this day would be filled with surprises and interruptions much like the previous ones had been. Nothing she had planned for this Sunday was going to occur, but looking back, I don't believe Mary would have changed anything.

Listen as I share highlights from Mary's early visit to Jesus' burial site. We'll look through the lens the fourth gospel provides.

When Mary arrived at the tomb just before the sun came up, she was surprised to discover the stone at the entrance had been rolled away. To her dismay, Jesus' body was missing, which broke her heart even more.

It appears she believed his body had been stolen by thieves or moved by the authorities, which led her to wonder how anyone could be so insensitive and cruel. Hadn't Jesus' enemies done enough to this innocent man she loved so dearly? Would this nightmare never end? Yes, it would, but not the way she could have ever imagined.

Looking at that empty tomb, Mary did the only thing she knew to do. 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. Instead of providing answers for Mary, all three asked her why she was weeping. She replied by telling them she was disturbed because someone had taken the body of her Lord, and she volunteered to retrieve his body 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 once 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 encounter and conversation.

It is hard to find a more comforting and inspiring story in scripture. It speaks to everyone who has suffered loss, experienced disappointment and searched for hope. Surely, this includes all of us.

What message did John want his readers, including us, to take away from his account of the resurrection of Christ? I pondered this for some time last week and believe one lesson to be this. Life is comprised of endings and beginnings, and both present us with intriguing challenges.

Mary went to the center of her grief that morning to bring closure to the most painful experience she had ever endured, the crucifixion of the man who had restored her sanity and self-esteem. She was at the foot of the cross on Friday and watched him die a cruel and horrible death.

The last thing she wanted to do that day was bury the man she called Lord. Nothing about this seemed good or right, yet she had no choice. He was dead, and she had to accept it.

So, she went to the tomb the first chance she got to bring closure to a relationship that ended far too soon. All she had now was her memories, and as precious as they were, they brought more pain than comfort on that Sunday morning.

All of us know what it is like to go to the cemetery of broken dreams. We have said goodbye to people and places, hopes and dreams, plans and promises, wondering if our broken hearts would ever heal.

This is where Mary was in the first part of our story. Her grief was immeasurable and her pain unbearable. This ending hurt worse than any she had ever experienced. Nothing inside of her wanted to accept it, yet everything around her said she must.

But the story does not end there. John doesn't leave Mary crying alone in the cemetery of broken dreams. The gardener turns out to be the resurrected Jesus who not only dries Mary's tears and lifts her spirit but also sends her running to tell the other disciples what she has experienced.

What Mary thought was the end of this fascinating journey with this remarkable man turned out to be a turning point. There was more, much more to come because of God's ability to bring good out of bad and life out of death.

What is John's message for us today? Sure, life has its share of endings, but faith is filled with the promise of new beginnings.

Shattered dreams will not have the final word in our lives. God will, and that word will be a good one.

Easter assures us there is no situation our faith cannot embrace and change for the better if we let God help us. If God can reach into a sealed and guarded tomb and give life back to his crucified Son, 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 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, just as God did for Jesus. In our humblest and most desperate circumstances, we can trust God to draw close and to lead us toward a new and better life.

As people of faith, we never come to the end of the road because, in the words of Old Testament scholar Dr. Walter Brueggemann, “the most distinguishing characteristic of God is God’s ability to make something new.” Brueggemann refers to this as the “always more of God.”

There are no dead ends on the road of faith! Every ending is the launching pad for a new beginning.

When Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished,” he did not mean, “It is over.” His purpose for coming to earth and his mission were completed, and he was faithful to the end. His life was not over, though. There was more work to be done and chapters to be written to his life’s story. God would see to it, and God did.

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 do not know what lies ahead, if anything.

You are facing limitations because of health issues and are not sure what the future holds. Your best friend relocated or someone you trusted betrayed you. You have made bad choices and are reaping the results, none of which is good.

Like Mary, you find yourself visiting the cemetery of broken dreams wondering if the clouds of uncertainty, doubt and fear will ever lift.

Read the second part of our text over and over until the Light of the world breaks through the clouds to give you hope for a new beginning. Turn your sadness and sorrow into a quest for what God is doing on your behalf. All the while, never forget the discovery of the risen Christ occurred in darkness, and it still does!

Life is comprised of endings and beginnings, and both present us with intriguing challenges. I assure you God is up to the challenge.

God knows that deep in your heart you yearn for life and hope. God is also aware of the courage you need to confront your confusion, feelings of inadequacy and fears as you travel down unfamiliar roads. This is why the same one who leads you out of the cemetery of broken dreams will take every step with you on your journey toward hope and healing.

Easter is about starting over when you thought all hope was gone. Is this the day, with God's help, you head in a new direction?